In Conversation

In Conversation with Simon Reynolds

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As Coeus Consulting (https://www.coeus.consulting), an award-winning indepen-dent IT advisory, announces the latest findings from its annual 'CIO and IT Leadership Survey 2021: Acceleration – How did Organizations Accelerate their Digital Journeys over the last 12 months, and how can they keep up momentum?' that looked at how senior IT Leaders have had to urgently prioritize and accelerate programmes during the pandemic, we ask Simon Reynolds, Coeus Consulting's Associate Director what has been the most surprising findings from the report.

Simon Reynolds is the Associate Director at Coecus Consulting. He is a senior transformation leader who has a strong track record of managing multi-million pound transformation programmes at large Energy & Utilities organizations, helping them balance the challenges of legacy IT and embrace digital technology and transition.

Simon lead the International Project of the Year (GSA Awards, 2018), a Network and Communications Sourcing programme that delivered c. €80M in savings for a major Energy client. He was also shortlisted for 'Team Leader of the Year' (MCA Awards, 2019).

What is the ethos behind Coeus Consulting?

Our ethos is to truly listen to our clients, and listen to our clients' customers as well. It is only by listening that you really understand their requirements, the problems or challenges being faced, and the best solutions available to solve them.

Part of our ethos as a company is to do the best for the client – and do that best – every single time. By listening and appreciating our clients, and I personally have over 15 years client side, I always find it is always hugely appreciated in terms of how we work as a company.

We have quite a flat corporate structure, so it is more about the experience of the people we bring into the firm and the expertise they offer to our clients that is key. What we want is people who can sit with a client and advise using that wealth of experience.

One of our strengths over larger firms is that we don't have any affiliation, or any preferences to any particular supplier. For example, if we go into a company to help them with a new sourcing deal, or a new supplier, we are going purely with the focus of what is going to suit that company best. Whether it be cost savings, efficiencies or innovation, we will tailor to their needs rather than push one given supplier.

At Coeus Consulting, we set ourselves up with a set of capabilities, then each of those capabilities are delivered in more of an holistic way so that we can deliver what the client wants end-to-end. For instance, we will not bring in one team to do strategy, and then another for sourcing, and then yet another team to do a technical delivery. Instead, we bring in one team from the very beginning that will manage the whole process, addressing all that is required, from start to finish. That approach results in a high level of repeat business.

As a consultancy we are around 40 people strong, headquartered in the UK and with a European office in Germany (we started the German office two years ago). Initially, setting up the German office was a reaction to the Brexit decision so that we could deal with our German clients, but with 35% of our business being in Germany or in Europe, it has proved to be a very good move for us. We are now recognized and well respected by companies and other consultancies wanting to partner with us and talk about how we could collaborate together.

Your latest 'CIO and IT Leadership Survey 2021: Acceleration – How did Organizations Accelerate their Digital Journeys over the last 12 months, and how can they keep up momentum?' is very in depth. What are some of the key points from the report which you have been quite surprised at, or have confirmed what you thought?
Each year we think about where things are in the industry and what our clients are telling us. So, the survey is about playing back what we are hearing in the market place and listening to what CIOs and IT leaders have to say.

It is more of a confirmation of what we are seeing and responding to changes in the industry. As a result of the pandemic particularly, companies were faced with a lot of unknowns and rapid change. We are all aware of the ways of working, but then we break this down and look at things such as – how they approach things, how they deliver, and what will become a priority down the line?

In our ''CIO and IT Leadership Survey 2021: Acceleration – How did Organizations Accelerate their Digital Journeys over the last 12 months, and how can they keep up momentum?' one of the things we asked when it comes to acceleration is about stopping. In my experience, organizations have always struggled to stop – it's always the case that 'we have spent money on it', or 'we have spent time on it, so we may as well see it through' – they keep moving towards a goal that has become obsolete.

Whilst some companies are better than others at stopping, what we saw from the report is that the pandemic has forced people to refocus on what they are doing – to stop and look at new priorities. Cost challenges, delivery and bandwidth came out in the report as things which needed addressing most.

Companies had to stop and focus on where the new priorities lay in terms of things like working from home, how to keep the end user working, how to secure the environment in remote access working, and how to do that whilst still providing a superior customer experience all while customer channels are evolving. So, an IT

solution needs to recognize that people have changed, and the way in which they work has changed.

I think the biggest surprise – although it shouldn't be – was how IT leaders had suddenly become so involved. We always think about calling this a CIO survey, but it is more than just CIOs – it's all kinds of IT leaders – CX roles change – the data officer, the digital officer, and it goes far beyond that, reaching to the CEO and the impact that IT has on business.

In the report, over 80% said they saw an improvement in ways of working solely because of how well IT was working with the business. Last year evoked change, with businesses turning to their IT department and saying, 'look, we need help here'. IT leaders were relied upon during the pandemic, to address everything from home working access, through to customer and client service and delivery, and be able to provide it all at the same level they always have. IT leaders can now use this experience and new visibility with respect and begin driving the digital agenda forward without the pushback that might have faced pre-Covid.

Often surveys say that IT budgets are either staying the same or being cut, so it is refreshing to see that your research shows that IT budgets are on the rise. Why do you think this is?
Yes, this was positive to see in the survey findings. The main thing is that IT budgets were made more accessible to accelerate activities, and for businesses to remain resilient. Having worked in delivering change for so many years, getting the buyer secured at the beginning is difficult, but getting that continued budget is harder still – and securing emergency funding has always been the hardest because it always had to be justifiable. In this case, during the pandemic, businesses had to survive.

In many ways, the red tape surrounding IT budgets has been cut because it became a necessity. Business survival and growth depended on it. I don't think there have been any headlines throughout the pandemic that have stated companies have stopped working because of their IT? In fact, IT leaders have been coming forward and saying, we have a solution that can help to achieve this, and IT leaders have got to be at the coal face to be able to suggest that.

When it comes to collaboration and working through one of things that prevented people before going fully remote was that need to actually work together. Will we now see an increase in digital transformation?
Digital transformation can't just come from IT. I heard a CEO recently say that the key focus for IT this year was digital transformation. There is always the assumption that because digital is in the name, it has just got to be a job for IT. But it involves whole business architecture and requires collaboration with those depending on IT also.

With IT there is now more than ever, an opportunity to say to those business leaders, 'look how quickly we have worked on this, what we have delivered and achieved, and how well it has worked.'

One of the things we wanted to test in the report was whether there has been a lot of disruption through the quick fixes and the quick deliveries which have been put in place – and there hasn't been. The IT worked.

Organizations were obviously confronted with some operational, as well as strategic difficulties including agreeing priority changes, implementing the solution and post implementation, each of which encompassed numerous challenges, but these could be addressed.

Businesses will however, need to revisit these 'quick fixes' over the coming months to build on these capabilities with more permanent solutions for the future.

Companies often forget to keep the customer at the heart of its digital strategy. Many times, the customer just has to come along for the ride. So was there anything in particular that came out of the survey findings that would be great to get more prominently in front of our readers?
One of things we took away from the report was that some customers and staff were finding it hard because they were being asked to communicate in different ways.

People always assume it is a generational thing, where actually it depends on your knowledge and understanding and how often you need to do this. Maybe you have always been face-to-face. Lots of anecdotal stories come through in the report.

IT needs to work with the business to establish accessible, user-friendly customer channels that cater for everybody's need to ensure the right level of service and not lose customers.

What is your view on how the priorities within the IT team has changed?
We found that some priorities such as cloud for example have been brought more sharply into focus.

Cloud is an interesting one because it seems that it has been around forever, and the changes in cloud have been mostly around the landing zones which keep changing. But the idea of moving to the cloud and moving away from legacy hardware in the data centre hasn't really changed. However, what has been brought into focus from a remote worker perspective is the ability to upscale, and flexibility to scale is easier when you are in the cloud.

Cloud is seen as being a cost exercise. If we move to the cloud then everything will be more efficient and we can close that data centre because we don't really need it. But, companies have realized that cloud is a lot more than that.

Another key factor coming through in the report was around data, which was the focus of our survey last year. Respondents are still saying that understanding and harvesting data that tells companies what the customer is doing, what the customer

is using, what the customer is looking for is key to moving the business forward, especially in digital transformation.

The report also touched on digital workplace strategy and end user experience. For instance, some respondents noted that in some areas they were using Skype, whilst other areas were using Microsoft Teams. Some staff were using IM tools and SharePoint – but they couldn't share and move documents around.

It highlighted what IT departments had been saying for years – either move towards one tool – or if it is two, make sure those tools can talk and work with each other so that the data remains in one place and people can communicate effectively and efficiently.

I think those will be the core priority shifts.

Those quick fix solutions and what they will do with them now will also be a consideration going forward. There will be the project that was stopped-if they were stopped, will they be restarted? Additionally, if there are projects that have been on hold, can these now be accelerated or approached in a different way? Taking the learnings from the last year, are these now more feasible? This is where our role becomes increasingly valuable as we begin to address these points with our clients to further their digital journeys.

On the remote working front, do you foresee a return to a more hybrid office environment, or once we have all had jabs will we all go back to the old ways of working – or take some of the things we have learnt with us?
I think it will be a mix of all of those. For example, we have one organization that has had an ongoing problem where their building/office not being big enough for the number of people they have working there. This has meant that they have had to put in a schedule of home and office working.

Whether they will now go back to that full cycle of four days a week and one day of working from home after the pandemic is questionable, because it just doesn't make sense. They have realized now that they can all work from home and there are numerous benefits to doing so.

What we do believe, and it is something we decided not to explore, is that we could see an impact on facilities and a reduction in office buildings – which would be great for the environment because fewer people will be travelling, meaning fewer offices will be used/required.

In addition, companies will also now start seeing that there are benefits of not having a desk that people are wedded to.

We see this as an interesting discussion, and one which we can help with to allow for these changes to working practices – ensuring the solutions are right, the bandwidth is right, and most importantly, the security is right.

Over 40% of respondents in the survey were concerned by compliance issues. How do you think this might change priorities?

It was unsurprising that compliance was a key issue within our research. As soon as organizations start working from home, especially if you are dealing with customer data, compliance becomes a much bigger concern.

Gone are the old style data rooms being next to you on a server holding customer data and never leaving the office, now we have multiple devices in different locations presenting huge security concerns. With so many now working from home, securing data and complying with varying legislations has become more challenging, particularly with the need to ensure that GDPR is being adhered to.

Many organizations, were having to make quick decisions and quick fixes. It was very much dependent on how risk adverse the organization was, and how secure the data that was and it was moving beyond the boundaries of the corporate network.

Security is a company's own working wheel, but we were being told that to move at pace, companies were being less rigorous – businesses were allowing things to go through where previously they would want to make sure every aspect of security and compliance is in place.

Going forward, IT needs to streamline these processes to ensure there is the required rigour to mitigate risk while also allowing the business to benefit from the quicker decisions and pace of delivery.

Is there a key point you would particularly like to get across to our readers?

For me, it comes back to the key acceleration point, and how we learn from that.

People have been talking about moving to an agile way of working for years and were struggling to do so because they were concerned about the compliance angle; they were concerned about the ways of working, or how people collaborate, and how they work. The past year has proven to every company that acceleration, working and collaborating in that way, with the correct funding, works, and it works well.

The key point to learn is how to identify the things which can be prioritized and accelerated. How to move away from the older ways of thinking with a schedule of things to do, and how to build in flexibility so that if you have a new product, or have a new request from a customer, you are able to address it – you are able to flex. You can then say, "Well, we did that under pandemic conditions – what we did worked." Look at why it worked, and what the company can learn from that – then the business can continue to move forward.

At the moment, it is the smaller, newer companies which are being disruptive in the marketplace. However even legacy companies become disruptive and our role is to establish how these older/legacy companies can also be a disruptive force.

Typically, it comes down to barriers such as a lack of flexibility; carrying too much baggage; or they haven't developed and adapted to those new ways of working. For me this is crucial for them to keep pace – they must become that flexible disruptive company.

For you, what has been the most inspirational thing to come out of the report?

Having worked on the client side for years, it was often hard to get IT seen by the business. You were often just given a budget and told (1) keep the lights on, and (2) asked, what are you going to do this year to improve? However, you were never truly seen by the business.

For me, the most inspirational thing to come from the report is the IT challenge. The IT team needed the challenge and businesses needed the challenge of adopting a new way of working. In our survey, 82% of respondents say IT has improved ways of working that has benefited both customers and staff bringing the two together to become one company – one digital solution – not two separate entities all vying for position in terms of priority.

What's important now is how IT leaders and business leaders continue to fully bring about the digital transformation. As they say in IT, "when it comes to digital transformation – the world will be perfect in five years' time!"