Technical debt is an anchor for innovation, security and your people

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For three decades, the term technical debt has been a buzzword in the software community, after originally being coined by developer, Ward Cunningham, to describe the less-than-optimal coding practices sometimes deployed in the haste to deliver software capabilities.

Today, Cunningham's brainchild can be attached to any technology initiative. But just like smart financial debt can help you to achieve life or business goals, not all technical debt is bad – and managing it well can yield many benefits for your organization.

Problems arise, however, when we consider that just like financial debt, you have to be wise about incurring its technical counterpart. Over a prolonged period of time, accumulated debt can become an anchor. Or if left to spiral out of control, grind you to what feels like a complete halt.

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Since the start of COVID-19, it has become even more prominent. Attempts to embrace digitization and leave behind legacy systems have been hindered by the plasters that patched the gaps for so long.

In the process, this has impeded innovation, undermined security and become an increasing burden on finances and employee resources. So, how can organizations keep pace?

One solution is to bring your team together to use their collective might to manually haul up the anchor. Or better still, invest in the right technology to ensure your journey to success is as plain-sailing as possible. Because even the world's best sailors, no matter how good they are, will only be able to sail so fast if they're in a ship from 1812.

But above all – seafaring metaphors aside – almost every business has some degree of technical debt. The trick is knowing how to identify, value and manage it. Combined with a willingness to first embrace change, which is made far easier when the benefits are there for all to see.
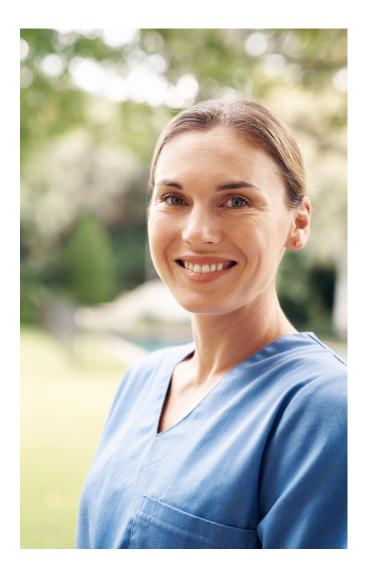
Understanding barriers to modernization

In a recent survey by McKinsey & Company, CIOs reported that 10% to 20% of the technology budget dedicated to new solutions is diverted to resolving issues related to tech debt. In addition, respondents also estimated that tech debt amounts to 20% to 40% of the value of their entire technology estate before depreciation.

For larger organizations, this translates into hundreds of millions of dollars of unpaid debt. But more worrying still, things are not improving – with some 60% of surveyed CIOs also stating that their organization's technical debt had risen noticeably over the past three years. So, why is this and what can be done to overcome these barriers?

First and foremost, companies must be open and willing to change. But the problem is, many organizations have always done things a certain way, with the perception that it works and a mentality of if it ain't broke, don't fix it. In other words, it's difficult to identify the technical debt swelling behind the scenes.

In other cases, companies will be all too aware of the need to start reducing debt and do have a willingness to embrace change, but simply don't know where to begin. In this instance, it often takes an external driving force or even new thinking in the form of a new hire to be the catalyst for change.

Perhaps the most pressing barrier, however, is budget. Overcoming technical debt and modernizing technology requires initial financial outlay, which isn't always deemed justifiable. It's therefore essential to present tech debt as a business issue, not solely a technology problem.

Freeing up and supporting your people

Arguably the biggest gain, even beyond financial, is for your people. While technical debt eats into budgets, one of its biggest drawback is the unnecessary time it adds to processes and day-to-day tasks.

Or, to look at this from another perspective, every hour spent managing complexity is invaluable time that could have been invested in driving real value for your business. If you look at the world's most innovative companies – according to Forbes – it's unimaginable that their people would be weighed down by technology.

Technology should be an enabler of innovation and a means to enrich employee experiences, rather than a hindrance. In the case of IT teams, this might include providing easier access to services, and enabling people to work flexibly – whether that's at home, in the office, or on the go.

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But the reality is, if you're to pay a visit to service desk agents in businesses of all shapes and sizes, you'll typically see them with a slew of browser windows open, jumping between different UIs and systems. In no line of work is this driving productivity, least of all in IT.

In short, we're saying down with swivel chair interfaces and in with *single panes of glass*. But beyond just reducing technical debt, organizations need to be embracing automation wherever possible, complete with the deliverance of embedded experiences. Doing so will be key to retaining and attracting IT talent, which is increasingly the backbone of any progressive business.

Shoring up security and driving resiliency

In addition to freeing up your people and driving innovation, security vulnerabilities are another side effect of technical debt. Typically, the older your technology, the harder it is to contain, maintain and patch.

But securing legacy systems is an endlessly moving target, which becomes harder to hit with each round of short-term solutions. Risks just continue to mount and you effectively have to be your own custom security team, because once your tech is out of support, you're on your own and companies take on spiralling costs simply to maintain a good security posture.

Long story short, the whole point of modern technology is that it's more secure, it's cheaper to own and run, but above all, it's more resilient. Today, if your operations aren't resilient and systems are going down, nothing else really matters, especially in relation to IT. Because if employees can't work and be productive, customers can't transact and everything essentially becomes redundant.

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Like many aspects of our lives and livelihoods, resiliency has also taken on new meaning since the start of COVID-19. Pre-pandemic, resiliency was centred on making sure everything was up and running, data centres were performing at optimal capacity and applications were available for people to use in the office.

In 2021, business resiliency instead refers to making sure your people can work from anywhere and are able to carry out their day-to-day, securely, on any device. But we've also seen a shift away from resilience meaning responding to disruption in a timely manner, to predicting and dealing with threats before they take a hold.

Reduce technical debt and propel your business forward

In today's fast-moving world, embracing digitization, driving innovation and ensuring business resilience is vital to keep up with the competition. But as long as your technical doubt continues to weigh you down, modernizing your technology will only grow in difficulty.

Of course, this is easier said than done. But most significantly, it can be done – especially with a manageable plan in place and an experienced partner by your side.

Get in touch to see how we can help you reduce your technical debt, free up your people and drive your business forward.

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