pointb.

Is Bimodal IT the answer?

How to reap the benefits and avoid the risks

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The Challenge

Every day, IT organizations face competing demands to deliver innovative, new capabilities quickly while also providing reliable and consistent services. The Bimodal IT model, as described by Gartner and others, is a response to addressing these two very different demands.

A Bimodal IT organization is essentially two organizations: a 'mode 1' organization focused on stability and reliability, and a 'mode 2' organization focused on innovation and quick delivery. The mode 1 organization continues to use traditional methods for delivering software and services; the mode 2 organization is free to adopt agile methods and DevOps practices.

The bimodal approach recognizes that, for most organizations, it is not appropriate to completely abandon traditional methods. Going bimodal gives IT leaders a conservative path for adopting Agile methods while minimizing potential disruption to their organization and work streams. The challenge is in developing the bimodal approach judiciously—adopting new techniques when and where the benefits outweigh the risk.

Point B's Perspective

Experienced IT leaders know that that Agile methods and other new practices may conflict with governance and risk management objectives. Wholesale adoption of new techniques is often impractical. But is Bimodal IT the answer?

We think the answer is more nuanced than splitting your IT organization into two.

Instead of dividing the entire IT organization into two groups, mode 1 and mode 2, we recommend that our clients consider using new methods on a more flexible, team-by-team or system-by-system basis, with regard for both customer satisfaction and risk management. We worry that a strict organizational IT divide may deter you from successfully adopting new practices where they would be beneficial. Such a divide can also damage morale, creating two camps that should be complementing each other—not competing for influence and resources.

We agree that Agile methods are not necessarily appropriate for all IT teams. However, we are also concerned that a bimodal approach may lead the mode 1 organization to become change-resistant, refusing to adopt new techniques that could improve delivery and

minimize risk. Organizing IT into different teams based on two different approaches complicates the ability to lead the macro- and micro-cultural changes needed for an organization to stay healthy—such as the successful adoption of Agile. Such divisions are prone to fostering organizational silos that resist coordination and cooperation. In the end, what you lose could be greater than what you gain.

For these reasons, we believe it is critical that an IT organization carefully considers the organizational and cultural dynamics before adopting a bimodal approach. IT organizations must also understand their business model—from customer acquisition to customer satisfaction—and be aware of the overall appetite for risk in order to build a foundation for Bimodal IT success.

Going bimodal by project

Rather than permanently divide their IT organizations, some IT leaders find it's best to take a bimodal approach on a project-by-project basis.

For example, one of our financial services clients has had success applying a unique Bimodal IT approach in its software development organization. One team operates in a mode 1 fashion, building a product for identity management and adding incremental features to it in a predictable, well-planned way. This mode 1 organization does use Agile methods, but product feature rollouts are very strictly managed. The team maintains an emphasis on risk management and a high-quality user experience.

The second team operates in mode 2 and focuses on innovation. This team was encouraged to experiment, using the tools, methods, technology and processes that the team believed would best enable them to deliver the solution. They were not constrained to follow the processes of the larger initiative, and were free to innovate. This freedom enabled the team to bring a unique approach and perspective to building a new product that would help drive customer adoption of the

new identity management system built by the mode 1 team.

In the end, the mode 2 team was able to develop and deliver a viable product in less than six months as a foundation for further iteration. Had the mode 2 team used the same processes as the mode 1 team, delivery would have taken approximately 11 months—nearly twice as long. In this case, the more flexible approach made sense for a tool that was less critical to the end-user experience and thus provided a safe way for the client to adopt a bimodal approach.

The Bottom Line

Today, more than ever, IT is expected to function like a utility, providing services that are always on and always available, while also functioning like a startup that produces innovative new products that enable transformation of their business models. Navigating these challenges requires a disciplined, multi-dimensional assessment of your current state and a change-focused roadmap that delivers a global and local approach for strategic and tactical execution.