Tech Debt's Image Problem

Resolve tech debt by highlighting its benefits

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Top priority business goals driving digital infrastructure investments over the next 18 months

(Worldwide)

42%
Employee productivity and retention

42%
GenAI adoption

37%
Budget/revenue optimization

37%
New digital business innovation

33%
Sustainability improvements

33%
Customer experience

17%
Retire tech debt

n = 883, NA: 367, WE: 216, AP: 300; Source: *Future Enterprise Resiliency & Spending Survey, Wave 7*, IDC, August 2023

Digital infrastructure investments favor business issues

IT and business leaders understand that tech debt is an important issue, but they are less clear on how to address it compared to other priorities. IDC's research finds that employee productivity/retention and generative AI (GenAI) top leadership's priorities when it comes to digital infrastructure investment. Retiring tech debt is last on the list because it is more difficult to tackle and less likely to cause an immediate issue.

Nonetheless, enterprises seeking a modernized digital infrastructure must address tech debt — but they needn't call it that. Some prefer focusing on the business risks they care most about, such as productivity/retention and GenAI adoption. Infrastructure modernization can provide the organization with opportunities to solve these issues.

Productivity and retention through a tech debt lens

Retiring tech debt among all the systems that employees interact with can profoundly impact a worker's ability to produce the outcomes required in their daily work. However, organizations tend to view tech debt as important but a low priority because the problem is often not well quantified.

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To avoid this pitfall, tech leaders must describe tech debt in business terms by enumerating the cost savings of a single employee's activity and quantifying how modernization adds up to productivity savings. They should extrapolate these savings across the business and point out that simplifying how employees interact with technology lays the foundation for the adoption of new technologies such as GenAI.

High-functioning talent seeks similarly well-run businesses. Addressing tech debt may make it easier to retain employees who feel bogged down by antiquated systems, infrastructure, and processes. These second-order effects are where solving tech debt provides its most substantial benefit. A modernized infrastructure can provide both the workforce and high-functioning talent with a competitive advantage, leading to greater engagement, focus, and innovation.

Discussing tech debt with key stakeholders

IT and business leaders need to convince stakeholders of the advantages and risks of addressing tech debt.

IDC suggests using one of the following approaches:

- **Present a positive vision:**
  Describe the advantages, savings, and risk mitigation that addressing tech debt enables.
- **Present a negative vision:**
  Enumerate the risks of not addressing tech debt in stark terms, including the consequences to the organization and its ability to grow.
- **Open a dialogue:**
  Start a factual, direct, and hyperbole-free discussion that includes time spent listening to stakeholders and answering their questions.

These approaches can help move tech debt higher up the priority list. When appropriate, consider bringing a third-party partner into the conversation to validate the need to tackle this issue.

Conclusion

Tech debt amelioration cast as a productivity promoter and employee experience tool makes for a more appealing use case. When advocating such a strategy, focus on the business advantages first before detailing the consequences of doing nothing. After all, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

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