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Team *talk*

eStar's Chief Operations Officer, **Kevin Rowland** explains what it takes to have a high performing retail IT team.

ONE OF THE biggest internal issues for any retailer these days is the disconnect between their IT department and the rest of the business. But why is this, and what can be done about it?

Some years ago, I was asked to manage a new team that was being set up within IT in a retail company, who were part of a large chain. The first thing I did was hold a meeting and ask everyone what they did. I listened to everyone tell me why they were an expert in this programming language or technical skills in an application or software, when it came to my turn I said, "I'm a professional retailer".

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It then became apparent to them, that we were all employed by a retailer, and that everything we did was to support the stores and ultimately our customers. As a team we visited stores whenever possible, or working closely with other areas of the business,

so that it was never forgotten that even if they were sat at their screens writing code, or deep in technical discussions, they were as much a retailer as any shop assistant.

When you work for an eCommerce provider it's not quite so easy to get people into physical stores, as they don't always exist, so instead we have framed posters up within the office of our client sites, to remind everyone that it is always clients first.

Another way to keep clients first, is to adapt the agile methodology "Scrum" , in its simplest form, all work is put into a list (company backlog), and then taken into teams (team backlog). That work is then prioritised (by the product owner), and an agreement reached with the team on how much of that list they can complete, based on the amount they can achieve (capacity), and the work is taken into the next two-week cycle (sprint). The teams are self-organizing, so they agree who and how they are going to complete the work, planning how it is going to be completed, holding daily meetings to discuss progress, then at the end of the sprint, a meeting is held to discuss what went well and what needs to be changed (retro).

The major difference within this process is that the person who decides on prioritization doesn't work for the team undertaking the work, but for the client team. This means that clients have a real voice in the meetings, and production is "only" responsible for completing work when they say they will. This also means, that if there are urgent requests then they can be more easily facilitated, as if other work has to be stopped or delayed, then the right conversations can be held with the right people.

By never losing sight of the client , and always putting them at the heart of any decision making, it means that you will meet expectations. IT should not say what order anything is going to be worked on without discussion and agreement with stakeholders: in some retail environments, there can be a lack of understanding that IT is part of the business, not an entity to be kept at arm's length.

Our balanced scorecard has four segments, the first two of which are "Client" and "People". We have produced ways of working that has trust at its base, a positive spin on 'Five Dysfunctions of a Team', a book we share with all new starters. Communication is key across the whole of the business, so that everyone works together with the single aim of keeping the client as the centre of focus. Put the client first, to everyone in the organization, and remind them that nothing is more important than that. ∎