

BEYOND THE SERVER ROOM

Written by Technologists, Ignored by Boards: The Strategy Nobody in the Room Can Read

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Governance Gap at the Top of the Technology Agenda



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Leadership · No. 4

Originally written March 2000 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

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A Strategy Written in a Language the Board Cannot Read

Somewhere in most large organisations this spring there is a technology strategy. It is thorough. It is intelligent. It was written by people who understand the estate better than anyone else in the building. And it is, for every practical purpose, ignored by the board that is supposed to own it.

This is not a failure of the people who wrote it, and it is worth saying so at the outset, because the easy explanation — that technologists cannot communicate — is both unfair and wrong. The document is ignored because of what it is, not because of any deficiency in who produced it. It was written as a technical artefact, in the vocabulary of the estate, answering the questions a technologist would ask. It was then handed to a board that asks entirely different questions, and the board did what boards do with a document that does not speak to them. It noted it, thanked the author, and moved on.

The Two Questions That Never Meet

The technologist's strategy answers the question: what should we build, and how? It describes the architecture, the platforms, the sequencing, the standards. These are real and important questions, and someone must answer them. But they are not the questions a board is convened to consider.

The board's question is different in kind. It asks: what will this do to the business, what will it cost us to be wrong, and how will we know if it is working? When a strategy arrives that answers the first question in exhaustive detail and the second not at all, the board has no purchase on it. There is nothing for a director to grip — no risk framed in terms they own, no choice framed as a choice, no consequence framed in the currency of the business. So the strategy is received as information rather than debated as a decision, and a document that is received rather than debated is, in governance terms, ignored.

- The technologist asks what to build and how; the board asks what it changes, what it risks, and how success is judged.
- A strategy that answers only the first set of questions gives the board nothing to decide.
- What cannot be decided at board level is not governed at board level — it is merely noted.

Why This Matters More This Year Than Last

It would be tempting to treat this as a perennial gripe, the sort of complaint the technology function has always made. It is not. The stakes have changed, and they have changed sharply in the last eighteen months.

Every board in the country is now being told that the network economy will remake its industry, that its competitors are moving, that standing still is the greatest risk of all. Boards believe this — the enthusiasm at the top of organisations for the new channels is, if anything, running ahead of the evidence. They are commissioning ambitious programmes and committing capital at a pace that would have been unthinkable three years ago. And they are doing so while the strategy that should inform those commitments sits, unread in any meaningful sense, one floor below.

We have arrived at the worst of both worlds: boards more willing than ever to invest in technology, and less equipped than ever to govern the investment.

The recently concluded work to carry the estate safely across the century boundary should have taught a lesson here, and in some places it did. That effort finally put technology risk in front of the board in terms the board understood — a hard deadline, a quantified exposure, a consequence anyone could grasp. For a brief period, the conversation worked. The tragedy is that the moment the deadline passed, the conversation reverted to type, and technology slid back into being a matter the board funds but does not govern.

Whose Job Is It to Close the Gap?

The convenient answer is that the board should try harder to understand technology. This is not entirely wrong, but as a remedy it is close to useless, because it asks the party with the least fluency to do the hardest translation. The burden sits the other way.

The strategy has to be written for the audience that must own it. That does not mean dumbing it down; it means changing what the document is for. A technology strategy that a board can govern leads with the business consequence, frames the genuine choices as choices with owners and trade-offs, states the risks in the currency of the business, and defines in advance how success and failure will be told apart. The architecture still matters — but it belongs in the annexe, not the argument.

1. Lead with the business consequence, not the technical design.
2. Frame the real decisions as decisions, each with an owner and a trade-off the board can weigh.
3. State risk and success in the currency of the business, so the board can hold them.

A technology strategy that has to be translated for the board was written for the wrong audience. The work of this year is not to teach boards to read the technologist's document. It is to stop writing a document only a technologist would read — and to start writing the one the board was always waiting for.