Unleashing the Value in the Long Tail of Your IT Project Backlog

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As an enterprise IT leader, your mandate has always been to create value for the organization through technology. That hasn't changed in this post-industrial, digital era.

But how you find and unleash that value may be shifting dramatically.

The criticality of technology for the modern enterprise has been increasing exponentially. The proof of this assertion is evident in your project backlog. The demand for new technology-enabled automation and changes to existing applications is unrelenting, making prioritization evermore important and difficult.

As you have struggled to balance this demand against your resources and capabilities, however, you may be overlooking a treasure trove of hidden value just waiting to be unlocked. You may be missing it because it is hiding in the projects you're NOT working on.

It is trapped in the IT equivalent of Chris Anderson's [long tail](#).

The question is how to find — and unleash — this value. And the answer may surprise you.

The Cause of the Backlog

Before you can release all of this pent-up value, you must understand the two elements that led you here.

The first is the backlog itself.

That may sound circular, but stay with me. The challenge is that IT has always had a backlog. And, like the parabolic frogs sitting in slowly warming water, it is easy to miss that the nature of the backlog has changed.

Today's backlog is becoming unmanageable — and, in an ironic twist, it is technology's success in creating competitive value that is the cause.

Historically, technology's value-creating role was limited to improving operational efficiency. As a result, demand management was a fairly straight-forward exercise. You just needed to identify those projects that either generated the most return on investment (efficiency gained divided by cost of the tech) or supported the most critical internal business processes.

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The result is an IT project backlog that is now longer than ever before, and one in which the traditional approaches to managing it are failing. To address this challenge, you must first understand the second element impacting it: the shifting nature of technology-enabled value

The unsurprising result was the explosive growth of demand on the IT function. However, in most organizations, there was little or no shift in how they prioritized and managed this growing backlog.

The recent pandemic has only made the situation worse. The sudden shifts in business and operating models that it created has led to an acceleration of transformational efforts, increasing the backlog even further.

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The Shifting Nature of Value (and why you can't predict where you'll find it)

The challenge with your IT backlog is that it probably doesn't look all that different — at least not in terms of the big, high-profile projects on which you're most likely focused.

The reason is that these efforts are still the most resource-intensive projects as they involve major system updates, enterprise-wide processes, and so forth. The challenge is that these initiatives, while requiring massive resources, may not be the largest drivers of organizational value, at least not when you look at the totality of your backlog — your long tail.

Your backlog is now filled with a whole bunch of strategic and customer-facing demands. But these demands often live in small, departmentally-focused projects — the kind that are easy to miss or de-prioritize because the competitive value they generate can be difficult to spot.

The big shift over the last decade or so is that technology is now the chief enabler of competitive differentiation. This shift, however, hasn't occurred because updating your ERP system is now a source of competitive advantage.

Instead, it is because the experience that organizations deliver to their customers (and employees and partners) is now the chief driver of competitiveness in a whole host of ways. In the vast majority of situations, it is technology that enables organizations to transform and reshape those experiences into ones that create competitive differentiation.

So while the big, resource-intensive projects continue to get the limelight, it is often within the vast collection of small requests that the majority of real value-generating improvements exist.

The challenge is that it can be difficult to identify what changes to the experience will create game-changing differentiation in the market — particularly in the context of traditional backlog prioritization and management approaches.

And that means that there is a ton of business value likely locked up within that long tail of your IT project backlog — if you can just figure out how to unleash it.

The Surprising Key that Unlocks Long Tail Value: Integration

To be fair — and clear — there is no one way to find and unleash the value in your long tail of a backlog. It will require several shifts, including changing how you evaluate and prioritize projects, and how you approach development efforts.

Still, there is one way that can help to immediately uncover value within your backlog, and it may be surprising: integration.

Integration can be a key that helps to unlock this value is simple when you think about it: much of what customers seek today is simple, integrated experiences that breakthrough information silos and organizational barriers. They want experiences that just get the job done.

Creating a differentiated experience often comes down to connecting your systems together in new and different ways, or creating a seamless bridge between multiple internal and external organizations.

Let's face it, your most important constituencies don't care about your organizational structure, your data architecture, or that some of the data they need is coming from some external partner. They want to work with an organization that strips away all of that complexity and simply delivers to them what they want, when and how they want it.

And much of that complexity comes down to the ability to rapidly create, shift, and manage integrations between systems and organizations.

So while ultimately addressing your backlog and the shift in the nature of value will require some more significant changes, simply accelerating the speed of deploying new integrations and adapting existing ones to changing business needs can unleash a tremendous amount of value all by itself.

Of course, the challenge is that while the word integration rolls off the tongue, the complexity of connecting all these different systems and data sources is very real — and difficult to address.

But much like you need a new perspective in terms of how you look at your backlog, you must also shift how you look at the process of developing, deploying, and managing integrations by exploring a new concept called hybrid integration platforms.

Why Hybrid Integration Platforms

Like most of the IT function, traditional integration platforms were built for a time in which systems evolved slowly and were focused on operational efficiency. Not only was the rapid and continuous change of integrations not necessary, it was discouraged. Changing integrations introduced risk and uncertainty.

The modern situation, however, is entirely different.

As we've just explored, organizations need to continually shift and adapt their integration landscape to meet ever-changing business requirements and customer expectations. However, when using traditional methods, the complexity of connecting systems and data across the vast digital ecosystems of the modern enterprise starts to act like a sticky lake of tar, inhibiting even the most well-intentioned efforts.

Traditional integration platforms use a systems-centric approach and rely on the expectation of a relatively static environment. It made perfect sense for a time in which the primary driver of integration efforts was operational optimization. Change was the enemy.

In today's environment, however, the center of gravity has shifted away from systems-centricity to one in which data — not systems — is the primary actor. More pointedly, to enable the dynamic approach to integration necessary to meet these new demands, it requires a system-agnostic approach that can transcend the multiple environments and ecosystems in which data may reside — whether that's internal or external, on-prem or in the cloud.

This perspective is not a subtle shift. It represents a fundamental rethinking of how organizations approach the discipline of integration. It also demands an entirely new class of integration tools, which we call hybrid integration platforms built for this modern need.

This new generation of tools, such as Digibee, are emerging to close the gap and help organizations remake their integration capability to meet the demands of the modern era. Most importantly, by enabling rapid data-centric integration across your ecosystem, these new platforms serve as one of the simplest ways to unlock the value hidden in your backlog.

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The Intellyx Take: Unlocking Value by Shifting Perspectives

No technology is the magical answer to the complex challenges facing the enterprise. But it is equally clear that the tools an organization brings to bear can either help or hinder their efforts in rising to whatever challenge they are facing.

Integrations platforms are a classic case in point. Merely investing in a hybrid integration platform will not eliminate your backlog, unleash untold quantities of value, or really do much at all by itself.

To harness the power that this new class of integration platform represents demands that you shift your perspective on how you approach your integration capability in the first place.

The shift in perspective, however, is also not sufficient on its own.

Embracing and adopting this more data-centric and adaptive ethos of integration will become a source of frustration if you attempt to apply it to an integration platform incapable of supporting it.

What is required, instead, is a holistic reimagining of your integration strategy and the ecosystem that supports it.

Doing so means ensuring that your tools can support the continuous shifting and adaptation of your integration landscape, that you move towards a data-centric view of your integration methodologies, and that you include your critical internal and external business partners as part of the process.

This new collaborative and data-centric approach to integration will be an essential element of your efforts to unleash the value locked within your backlog — an unleashing, which will put you and your entire organization on the fast track to competing in an ever more competitive world.

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Charles Araujo is an industry analyst, internationally recognized authority on the Digital Enterprise and author of [The Quantum Age of IT: Why Everything You Know About IT is About to Change](#).
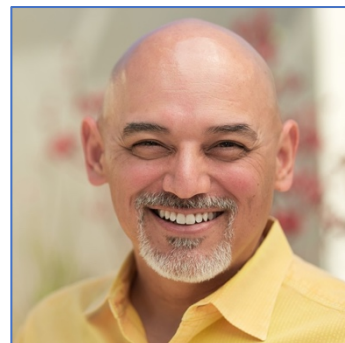
As Principal Analyst with Intellyx, he writes, speaks and advises organizations on how to navigate through this time of disruption. He is also the founder of The Institute for Digital Transformation and a sought after keynote speaker.

He is a regular contributor to CIO.com and has been seen in Time, InformationWeek, NetworkWorld, Computerworld, USA Today, and Forbes.

About Digibee

[Digibee](#) developed their hybrid integration platform to quickly connect enterprises to the digital world using Kubernetes and low code. Their innovative and flexible platform solves the integration challenge faster and more efficiently than any other integration approach in the market.

Their holistic and agile approach to integration, allows enterprises to accelerate decision making, enhance customer experience and achieve greater business outcomes in a fast and scalable way without a major investment. Digibee has offices in São Paulo, Brazil; Sunrise, Florida and Denver, Colorado.