A fitness regime for IT

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While IT directors are being told to "Do more with less", some commentators believe "a good recession is a terrible thing to waste".

So is now really the best time for IT to become fitter and if so, just how practical is this?

Historically, the ever-dropping costs of computing power created an unsustainable environment of over-provisioning of IT in enterprises. This was caused by Moore's Law (of exponential growth in computing power) and the onward march of IT through modern organisations. Why get more out of the "obsolete" systems you own, when your new power-hungry software deploys more easily on the latest shiny hardware?

Buying your way out of trouble was a CIO's best, often only, strategy. Today though, leading analysts are reporting no growth in IT spending this year and such "lazy purchasing" attitudes need to change.

Of course, now, with increased competition for today's penny-pinching customers, service levels still need to be maintained. This means that no Telco chief executive can extend the wait times for connections and no bank executive wants longer queues at their ATMs. Rather than doing "more with less", the cold reality today is a burning need to make what you have work better.

In fact, for the foreseeable future, doing "more with the same" is likely to be the default. This calls for new thinking – IT on a diet and exercise regime.

Savvy executives know they now need to squeeze out the performance levels promised in glossy brochures from their existing kit. The good news is that industry analysts calculate the average utilisation of data centre servers is between 15 and 20 per cent, so clearly there is room for improvement.

The best strategy is to discard the brochures and take a long look in the mirror. Under-utilisation of hardware, software licences and IT staff is in fact over-provisioning. So, divide your applications into three broad classes to help prioritise precious IT funds:

Class 1. The transaction-heavy applications that your business runs on (typically there are a dozen such crucial transactions). If these go down, you lose lots of money fast.

Class 2. Applications which do not readily fall into Class 1 or Class 3.

Class 3. Applications not used every single day and legacy applications. Surprisingly, most can be replaced by a combination of the latest online office productivity solutions from Google, Adobe and others.

Such a "fitness assessment" makes most Class 3 applications obsolete. Class 2 applications are then redeployed in virtualised environments and the resources saved would be redeployed to "add muscle" to the crucial Class 1 applications.

With the fitness plan in place, it is time to shape up the transaction-heavy applications. Taking a transaction-centric view, rather than an application-centric view is crucial. Customers experience transactions personal to them, not average response times for databases or applications.

Modern performance management addresses bottlenecks down at the transaction level. It is transactions, not applications, which the business trusts IT to deliver. They determine how fit-for-purpose modern IT departments are.

Efficiently flowing more transactions through the same infrastructure allows IT teams to delivering better service level agreements, just as a personal trainer produces fitter clients without buying new body parts. This is a vital new skill in economic downturns.

We should remember, IT is not the first industry to have to up its game in lean times. The US steel industry now produces more steel than it did 30 years ago with far less plants and employees. Ironically, while IT has been the catalyst for many productivity leaps it has not itself faced the procurement discipline it now needs.

Doing more with less is a myth. Everyone knows that diets, especially crash diets, don't work – but freeing up unused computing resources and redeploying them smartly is a lot more like a fitness regime for IT.

It may hurt in the short term, but it will help the IT department emerge stronger from the downturn. A new-found track record of return on investment could be the perfect argument for IT budget increases as the economy picks up again.