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TECHNOLOGY CHOICES OF THE PAST CAST A LONG SHADOW OVER SUSTAINABILITY IN THE FUTURE

GREEN IT IS NOT NEW

Sustainability has become a de-facto key topic in today's society. Individuals, corporates and the government alike are waking up to the fact that we must set a trajectory towards a sustainable future.

In the technology world the topic of Green IT is far from new. Those who have been in technology long enough will remember the last days of CRT monitors where the manufacturers were clambering for green certifications. The topic picked up some momentum in the early days of cloud but to some extent was squeezed out of the agenda during the banking crisis in 2008. Perhaps the point when it started really meaning something was when organisations could first register and compare their credentials which was probably the establishment of the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP.net) in 2011.

THE PROBLEM IS STILL GROWING

IEven though the topic has been around for a long time, the impetus that COP26 has given society has translated into IT recognising the part it has to play itself in supporting sustainability.
Though IT may only account for a relatively small percentage of emissions, this footprint like-for-like is set to increase massively as organisations are progressively more digitised and automated; in the same way that also means that the topic of IT's contribution becomes more prominent in such organisations as it represents and increasing proportion of their emissions footprint.

Another challenge for organisations is although many directionally have started setting net zero and carbon neutral goals, they haven't necessarily considered or priced the cost of this related to technology.

TECHNOLOGY APPROACHES ARE PART OF THE PROBLEM

Looking across many companies' technology planning approaches, the efficiency of a solution is still very rarely part of the design envelope of IT systems or the procurement of IT equipment, and if it is a design factor even then its importance is still underplayed typically. In technology planning cycles that can be 3-5 years and organisations who might procure and use systems for 10-20 years, the decisions of today without

the foresight to consider sustainability will create the problems of tomorrow. Even more challenging is the hindsight that decisions made previously that are often extremely difficult to unpick will have a long term residual cost on the sustainability of organisations in the future.

Maybe the worst of all worlds is half-hearted modernisations. One very common half-hearted modernisation being utilising cloud but basically as a hosting environment. Whilst there might be more efficient use of resources in cloud related to hosting, not opening up the design of solutions means that a second stage will at some point inevitably be required. Conversely, in the same situation not going to Cloud yet because at an indeterminate point in the future there is a desire to transform a system is also committing to a level of additional emissions in the intervening period.

Another challenging approach is technology outsourcing where organisations are committed to agreements that don't necessarily drive the right behaviours regarding efficient computing, instead the efficiency driver is all around the human service wrap around the technology and squeezing out cost efficiency.

WHAT CAN WE DO DIFFERENTLY?

Considering Sustainability in Planning

For future technology decisions the single most important change businesses must make is to change their technology planning to consider sustainability directly as one of the decisional drivers understanding that it will become much more prominent and the costs of not being sustainable (for instance offsetting costs) will potentially grow hugely over the next few years. The approach is conceptually easy but it can be very difficult to realise because the priority of sustainability over other objectives (like cost!) can be difficult to justify. Even if this is difficult it's the easy problem to solve, because the hard problem to solve is what to do with what you already have.

Understanding Current Challenges Properly

Technology decisions of yesterday are the hard problem. Characteristically they are hard because any real solution to be significantly more sustainable requires re-opening the design. Whilst cloud can play an important role in this as the driver of efficiency and provider of more sustainable services, its help is limited. In fact the answer is multifaceted and as with many things unless the answer is to throw everything away it's

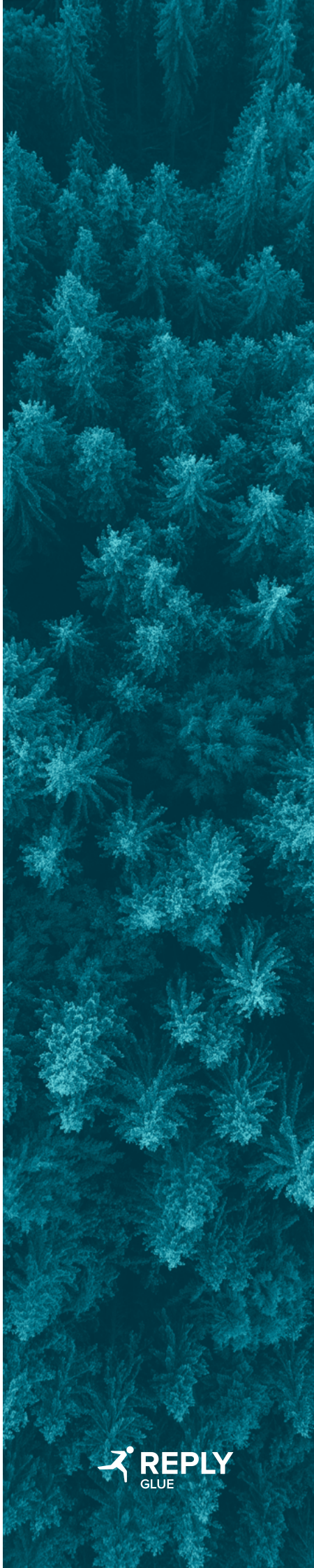
more likely that organisations need to know what they have today. That might seem obvious, but very few organisations have a perspective on what they have in terms of its relative environmental impact considering all dimensions of their current estate. Whether it is on cloud or on premise it is an activity that is increasingly necessary as it provides the basis for technology planning around sustainability with a known start point.
The places to focus are the parts of the IT estate that deliver or directly support the organisations' outcomes, not just the tin and wire underneath them. When looking at the outcomes we might be looking at everything from n-tier applications to mainframe applications to microservices in technologically enabling those outcomes. Through all of these a few common themes emerge that are the key to the efficiency of use of resources.

Considering the full-life Costs of Services

When technology is planned it needs to be planned through-life, considering the full life costs and it's contribution to the business capabilities it supports. When this long-term lens is placed on technology investments incorporating environmental factors it can put investments in quite a different perspective as it forces organisations to think beyond the ROI horizon.

Raising Prominance

Above all, the answer is to raise the prominance of the sustainability of technology as an integral part of business planning in the future, potentially as an equal to other measures to quantify the success of investments and the justification for having to re-visit previous investments.



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