

# Bringing Business and I&T Into the Same Room

*How a major UK airport co-created the partnership its new IT Operating Model needed, in a single day*

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## THE SHORT VERSION

A major international airport was rolling out a new IT Operating Model (ITOM), and everyone knew the model would only ever be as good as the relationship behind it. The business felt like it was handing IT a list and waiting; I&T felt like it was forever saying no. So before launching processes and structures at people, we did the human work first. As a people-first organisation, that's our instinct, and here it was the whole point. **People-first** meant a Business and I&T Collaboration Day where the two sides built the partnership together, in the same room. **Execution Integrity** meant the day wasn't a talking shop: it produced clear, observable requests and firm commitments that fed straight into the operating model. And **Behaviour Risk Management (BER)** meant naming the real risk out loud, that without changed behaviours on both sides, the shiny new ITOM would just be a diagram while everyone carried on as before.

We prepared by interviewing more than twenty business directors first, so nobody walked in cold. The day itself moved from defining what partnership means, to telling honest stories about change, to a structured round of requests and agreements. The output was a set of shared commitments and a clear "what's different on Monday". Here's how it worked.

## The situation we walked into

The airport isn't really one business; it's more like a city of thirty-odd businesses sharing a site, and a multi-billion-pound capital programme running underneath them. Its I&T function was standing up a new operating model to fix some long-standing frustrations, and the interviews we ran beforehand laid those frustrations bare.

The business felt like it was placing orders rather than shaping decisions, in one director's words, "order-takers, not order-makers." People didn't know which door to knock on, who their counterpart in I&T even was, or how to get something done. They'd ask for something practical, hear "no budget, no time," and then watch something shiny they hadn't asked for turn up instead. And I&T, for its part, was wrestling with how to say no without actually saying no, and wanted what one person called its "license to operate."

Underneath it all sat a trust gap. A new operating model alone was never going to close that. You can publish a target operating model, but you can't publish a relationship. That has to be built, by the people in it. So we organised the day around three ideas: **People-first**, **Execution Integrity**, and **Behaviour Risk Management (BER)**.

## People-first: do the human work before the process work

It would have been easy to roll out the operating model and run training on the new processes. We did the harder, more valuable thing first: we got the two sides into a room to build the partnership themselves.

- **We listened before we convened.** Ahead of the day we interviewed more than twenty business directors, capturing what they were excited about, what worried them, and what they needed from I&T. That meant the day was shaped by their words, not our assumptions, and nobody arrived feeling ambushed.
- **We started with what partnership actually means.** Rather than lecturing, we asked everyone for the words they'd use to describe a real partnership. Out came trust, openness, shared goals, joint accountability, better together. That became the shared language for the rest of the day.
- **We used storytelling to make it human.** Mixed groups of business and I&T people built short stories about change across themes like demand management, innovation and customer experience. Telling a story together does something a slide can't: it surfaces emotion, breaks down silos, and gets people to a genuine "we're in this together."
- **We mixed the room on purpose.** Business and I&T leaders sat together, swapped perspectives, and saw each other as counterparts with names and faces rather than an anonymous "other side."

By the afternoon the tone had shifted from grievance to genuine co-creation. That shift was the point, because everything that followed depended on it.

## Execution Integrity: a day that produced commitments, not just good feelings

Collaboration days can evaporate the moment everyone leaves the room. We built this one to produce something concrete and traceable, so it actually moved the operating model forward:

- **A structured requests-and-agreements method.** Each side made clear, specific, observable requests of the other, no vague wishes. Then, request by request, people responded in real time: "yes, I commit," or "not possible, but here's a counter-proposal," or "let's park that," or "be clearer, that's too vague."
- **Real agreements, captured on the day.** The commitments were practical and mutual: early visibility of a prioritised roadmap for each area, business partnering with the jargon stripped out, the business tying its "shiny things" back to strategy, and I&T being allowed to fail safely where the prize was worth it.
- **Themes that fed straight into the model.** We pulled the agreements into clear themes, strategic alignment, collaboration and partnership, operational effectiveness, innovation and flexibility, and customer focus, which mapped directly onto the design of the operating model.

- **A concrete “what's different on Monday.”** The day closed on specifics: a business face-off model with a clear RACI, demand-management journey workshops, and a regular cadence of business and I&T check-ins, so momentum carried into the working week rather than fading over the weekend.

Execution Integrity meant the day earned its place in the programme. It produced inputs the operating model genuinely needed, not just a warm afterglow.

## **Behaviour Risk Management (BER): the model is only as good as the behaviours behind it**

Here's the behaviour at the heart of it, and it was running on both sides. The business had slipped into a passive habit, lob a request over the wall, wait, and grumble when something unwanted came back. I&T had settled into a defensive one, treat every request as something to filter, deflect or say no to, just not out loud. Neither was being difficult; years of frustration had simply taught each side to behave that way towards the other. The risk was obvious: design the finest operating model in the world, and if those two habits didn't change, people would quietly revert and nothing would actually improve. So the day was built to surface those behaviours, name them, and start replacing them:

- **We made the order-taker and gatekeeper habits impossible to ignore.** By having each side voice what it actually needed from the other, the passive “we just submit and wait” and the defensive “we find reasons to say no” came out into the open, where they could be talked about rather than silently resented.
- **We turned the new behaviours into observable requests, not good intentions.** Every request had to describe a visible, actionable behaviour, so “be more collaborative” became something concrete you could later watch happening, or not. Vague aspiration doesn't change how people act on Monday; a specific, witnessable commitment does.
- **We pulled the unspoken worries into the room.** The behaviours that quietly derail a model are the ones nobody says aloud, who owns the front door, who really prioritises, whether everyone agrees on the resources, how the supply chain gets brought along. Naming them turned private grievance into shared problems the model could be designed to handle.
- **We built accountability that ran both ways.** The fix for a passive business and a defensive I&T is to deny either side the comfortable role. The business committed to articulate priorities and tie its requests to strategy; I&T committed to partner openly, present choices and be transparent about the roadmap. With both sides visibly on the hook, neither could sit back and wait for the other to move first.
- **We set a rhythm so the old habits couldn't quietly creep back.** A regular cadence of check-ins meant the commitments got revisited and the relationship reviewed, so changed behaviour was something the group kept returning to rather than a one-day promise that faded by the next deadline.

The shift was from *two sides waiting for the other to change* to *both sides making visible commitments they could be held to*.

## What changed

Here's what the day delivered:

- **A shared definition of partnership**, built from the participants' own words, that gave business and I&T a common language to work from.
- **A set of clear, mutual agreements** captured live, covering strategic alignment, demand, innovation, two-speed IT and customer experience.
- **Direct inputs into the operating model**, including a business face-off model and RACI, so the day's outputs shaped the design rather than sitting in a report.
- **A genuine shift in tone**, from “order-takers and gatekeepers” to “we're in this together,” which is the foundation any operating model needs to actually land.
- **A concrete next-steps plan** and a standing cadence of business and I&T connects, so the partnership kept being worked on after the day ended.

## Looking back

The operating model was never the difficult part. The difficult part was the relationship it sat on. By listening first, getting both sides building the partnership together, and turning good intentions into observable commitments people could be held to, the day gave the new ITOM something no document could, a business and an I&T function that actually wanted to make it work.

*You can publish an operating model in an afternoon. **Earning the partnership underneath it is the work that makes it real.***