

A Successful Implementation

WHY DO INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) projects seem to always spiral out of control with delays and cost overruns? By the time a difficult implementation is completed, the priorities the software was intended to address may have changed.

Every IT project should start with the customer clearly defining his problem and setting expectations for the solution. A good example of how setting expectations can impact success is Southwest Airlines, one of the most successful companies of the last two decades. The key to Southwest's success is its ability to clearly define what the customer expects—cheap fares, on-time service and no frills—and consistently meeting those expectations.

DEFINING EXPECTATIONS

What's true for airlines also applies to software—if you cannot clearly define and meet customer expectations, you will never satisfy them. The process can be highly politicized and usually requires multiple levels of approvals.

Software vendors sometimes treat this situation more like a game—where the goal is simply to make the sale rather than like a doctor diagnosing a patient. When dealing with a Byzantine buying process, it's tempting to cut corners and do whatever is necessary to close the deal. While the sales force may think there's nothing wrong with that idea, it rarely results in the desired long-term outcome: customer satisfaction.

However, the vendors are not the only ones to blame. IT customers have an important role to play as well. If the vendors are the doctors, the customers are the patients—they must effectively communicate what business problems they wish to solve before the vendors can begin a diagnosis.

CHOOSING FEATURES

The most useful thing you can do as a customer is to know exactly what you want from your IT systems and for what options or features they are willing to pay. With that in mind, here are seven tips on how to help your IT implementation succeed:

- Take time to make decisions properly. IT systems that model a company's business process, such as multiple legacy systems, often become a hygienic system—like plumbing, nobody notices its existence until something goes wrong and everything grinds to a halt. It takes time to properly define and model the scope of what is required for hygienic systems, especially for large companies.

- Decide whether you need a commercial or custom solution. If a company is using software to model a proprietary business process that represents a competitive advantage, a customized solution is probably necessary. Companies need

to determine to what degree their processes are proprietary or standardized and how much they're willing to spend for a software solution. However, they shouldn't expect customized solutions at commercial prices.

- Consider the total cost of ownership. If you go with a custom solution, don't forget the ongoing costs to support software in addition to the cost of building it. Ask yourself: is your company's core competency in energy marketing or IT solutions? The overhead costs of an IT department for managing an in-house solution can be substantial.

- Look beyond just the bells and whistles. Consider how the software can be upgraded or expanded.

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- Make the selection team accountable for success. Vendors may try to satisfy the selection committee, but the resulting choice may not be the best for the company as a whole.

- Specify completely any additional work to be done. For cutting edge IT systems, often there are additional features or functionality to be added later. Problems arise when the vendor doesn't completely understand what is expected.

COMMUNICATION NECESSARY

Always remember that IT system implementation is a two-way exchange. Reputable vendors will bend over backwards to meet and exceed customer expectations, but the customer must communicate what those expectations are. Customers should examine the underlying business process that the IT system is intended to manage, determine if an off-the-shelf solution can be used, and make their choices based on how the software works in the real world.

Choosing an IT solution can be one of the most critical decisions a company makes. Taking the additional time and effort to make better choices can make the difference between a successful implementation and a costly failure. ■

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