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"Selecting & Implementing Business Software" by Jay Deakins

Selecting and implementing business software is an extremely important task for any enterprise that expects to aggressively compete in the new millennium. It is certainly not a simple process, but can be tamed with a reasonable amount of planning and forethought. While this article is aimed at business software systems, the process is virtually the same for any large-scale, enterprise-wide software system.

Purchasing any large-scale software system requires a marriage between the software vendor and the customer. Like any good marriage, a successful union requires compromise, respect and most of all hard work from both parties. It has been said that, while boating, if you fall out of the boat, you must assist in your own rescue. The same is true of software implementations. The customer cannot be a silent bystander. The customer must embrace the project and help the vendor along the way.

Prior to meeting with any prospective vendors, the project should be defined as to what needs to be accomplished, the timetable and budget in place to complete the process, and possibly most importantly, who within your organization will be responsible for the project. Care should be given to define current systems or processes that will be affected by the system. Carefully review what will be replaced by the new system and what systems must be able to communicate and work with the new system. If you can accomplish your goals with a single system, you are ahead of the game. The maintenance costs of software tends to rise exponentially as you cobble together systems from different vendors and try to keep them in sync.

The business model of prospective vendors should be very carefully considered. The most common structures are software companies selling direct to the end user or through resellers. Resellers can provide a local presence and comfort level, but also add a mother-in-law to the client-vendor marriage. There is an old programmer’s joke that quips, God was able to create the earth in six days only because he did not have an installed base of customers to keep happy.

Well-designed software should be able to be configured through user-defined database tables as opposed to hard coded customization. There is a basic law of software that says that it is more expensive to maintain than it is to develop the first time. Before you jump into the water and hire someone to write from scratch or customize a piece of software, keep in mind that you will essentially be maintaining this software forever. If other software you use changes or gets a simple update, you may have to redo your customization. When a new operating system gets released, you may have to redo your customization. When your business practices change, you may have to redo your customization. Generally speaking, the only time you should develop your own software is when there is absolutely nothing already available to handle your task.

Pay particularly close attention to the data conversion capabilities of any software you might

consider. Older mainframe-style software was often quite proprietary, which results in a real chore when you try to get information in or out of your system. Modern systems should be open database connectivity (ODBC) compliant. ODBC provides a common link for databases from multiple vendors. Most modern systems can also send information to the popular spreadsheet programs.

Your prospective vendor should be able to demonstrate how the system will work for your particular operation. With a minimal amount of setup, you should be able to run through a few complete cycles of the system. It is acceptable and normal during the review process to identify a few areas that need to be changed for you, but you should not see lots of bugs or odd system behavior during this process. Since the software will affect many of your coworkers, you should get input from as many people as possible during this process.

In judging your prospective vendor, pay particularly close attention to everything that you do understand. If the vendor does not make sense on the common sense issues, chances are that the technical issues you may not fully understand will have similar problems. Now is the time to find out from the vendor who will do the actual implementation of the system. If not clarified now, the Albert Einstein who is doing the system demonstration may be replaced by a bumbling Jethro Bodine from the Beverly Hillbillies after you sign the contract and begin the actual work.

Once you decide that your prospective vendor can probably do the job, you should request references of other companies who have worked with the vendor on similar projects. If the vendor cannot or will not provide two or three existing customers who will share their experiences with you, do not walk away, run away. An amazing number of software systems are sold and never installed. Be certain that the references you speak to or meet with have actually used the system through a complete business cycle. You do not want to take the word of a honeymoon bride that her husband is not grumpy in the morning. The most important things to find out from the references are (a) are they happy with the vendor, (b) did the vendor deliver all they promised on a timely basis at or near the projected budget and (c) has the vendor responded to problems quickly and with a proper attitude? Be certain to request references of companies who worked with the same person who will be in charge of your account.

Properly selecting people for the internal implementation team can radically affect the time required to implement a system as well as the quality of the final product. There is a basic conflict to consider when deciding who should help with the project. Small implementation teams result in fast implementations. Large implementation teams generally result in more internal “buy in” to the project, yet almost always take longer for any given task.

When calculating the total budget for a software project, consider new hardware that may be required to run the new system. Will new workstations, printers, modems and phone lines be required? In almost all cases, the internal labor cost to implement a system far outweighs the actual software and hardware costs. Your people will spend a great deal of time implementing the software and oftentimes redesigning your day-to-day business practices.

A good software vendor is about thirty percent software developer, forty percent process engineer and thirty percent family counselor. Choose a software vendor as you would a business partner and you should find you have a valuable resource as you work to grow your business.

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