

So YOU think you can implement?

By Jeffrey Brown, MBA

Did you know that over **50 percent** of new software implementations fail due to poor project management and planning?

Technology is only part of the “people, process, technology” concept, but it’s an important component. Educating yourself about the entire process beforehand will prepare your organization for a successful implementation.



Choose your direction

Choosing a project manager

Once a company determines it needs a new technology, the first step usually comes as a top-down initiative, often directed from the executive level. Frequently, the management team is asked to start an evaluation to implement a new technology. Often, the initiative is pushed directly to the IT department, if the company has one.

For companies with some sort of IT department, they usually scour the internet, contact IT friends, watch a few demonstrations, and then finally select a few options. This might seem like a good place to start, but IT professionals often don’t always have the company’s best interests in mind. They tend to make decisions based on personal interests and preferences, such as choosing a software that continues to require heavy IT support, something that might be compatible with their own software they developed, or the worst: one that would give them the most job security. I don’t like to paint pictures with such broad strokes, but this does happen, more often than not.

Suppose you don’t have a strong IT department. You ask the VP of Operations or Director of Finance to look into new technology. Do they have the software experience to make a decision based on what’s best for the company? Upper-level management also has personal interests, such as a program that has really neat features, but might be more than the company really needs.

Department managers are usually the least desirable people to evaluate technology. They don't speak the IT language and they often fall prey to slick salesmen promising the world. Or worse, they look at it as expense rather than an investment. Not to mention, don't these individuals already have a full time job? This is probably not the most cost effective use of their time.

If you want someone internal to act as the project manager, choose a person with experience in software implementation and good project-management skills.

However, you really need someone who is knowledgeable about the best available solutions. I usually recommend hiring an outside individual or firm that specializes in software project management to guide you through the available options, identify your current and future needs, and raise ideas that you might not consider. In the end, you will probably save money by hiring a knowledgeable professional. **Choosing the wrong software or not being prepared for it can be a very costly mistake.**



company or even an individual; you will get better attention and often better results.

Selecting a vendor

Many software vendors (by no means all) have one major goal: sell the product, implement the technology, conduct mediocre training, and collect fees. Major software companies have very little interest in the success of the project because they are in it to simply sell the software and move on to the next customer.

Smaller software providers tend to have more interest in your success because a good referral from you equals future business for them, and you could represent a significant portion of their annual income. I always recommend selecting a small

Deciding who will implement

After choosing a software vendor, the task of implementation usually falls on the shoulders of the people who will use it. This might be one or two people, or in a large-scale decision, it might be the entire company.

If you assign one person to implement new software, the project might take up 50 to 80 percent of their workday, sometimes for six to nine months. Don't give the task to someone who can only work on it part time. **You must find someone who will be dedicated to the project from beginning to end.** Also note that the person should be someone who can afford to dedicate a large amount of time without adversely affecting day-to-day operations.

GET EVERYONE ON BOARD

Most of the big software companies, i.e., Salesforce.com, usually partner with a local consulting firm to conduct the implementation. This is often a good idea. You will typically get better attention to detail, higher skilled trainers, and better IT support. The larger the company, the less experienced staff you will have onsite – but you're usually paying the same exorbitant hourly rates. If the software company doesn't offer a local partner to help in implementation, you can typically find a local firm that has experience in software implementations to help in the process.

Getting employees on board

At this point, you've still only scratched the surface of a successful software implementation. The most common missed step is getting the buy-in from the entire company. **The way you communicate your new investment to your staff is critical in the success of the technology.** Employees must be as convinced as you are that this is the right decision. Involve all employees in the evaluation decision, even if you don't weigh their opinions as heavily as others. You will get a much higher adoption rate if you let employees help make the decision about something that affects them.

Once you've decided on a technology that best fits your company's needs, make it a major event for the organization. Hold a company-wide meeting in advance of the launch explaining what you're doing and how it's going to benefit the organization. If you can't articulate the benefits and return on investment to your organization, then perhaps you didn't make the right decision. This is a big investment and initiative; promote it internally with the same amount of impact. This is not a "flavor of the day" initiative — it needs real substance.

Be very clear with your staff regarding your intentions to replace their jobs with technology. **You must be honest. If a new technology will eliminate someone's job, tell them as early as possible.** Try to identify other departments or positions they can be moved into. If you know jobs will become redundant and no positions are available, be up front with everyone. A staff member who sees that their job will no longer be available might cause the implementation to go sideways and become a major roadblock. Usually these employees will subtly promote the idea throughout the company that the new software is a bad decision that won't work. They will find even the smallest flaw and make it sound like it's a huge defect. Beware of these people – they need to be pulled aside early and counseled.

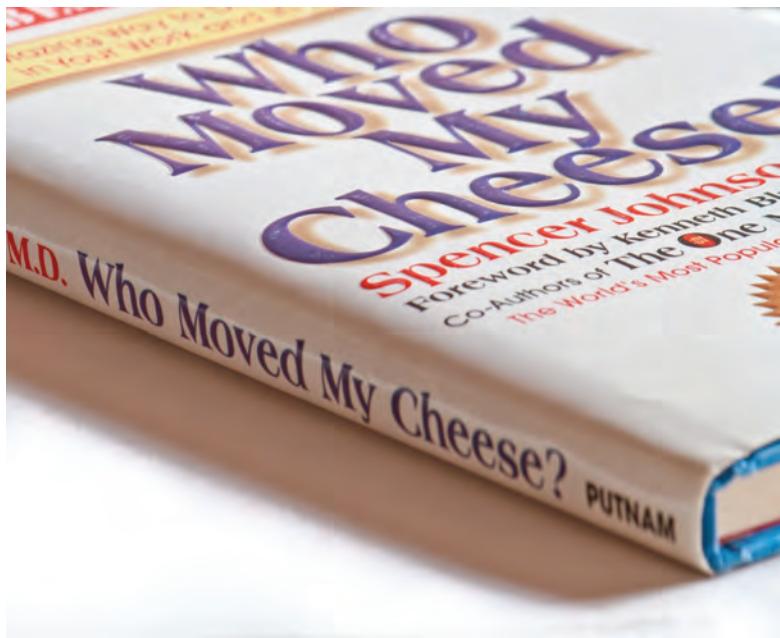


CAUTION:

Selecting a software because it's the cheapest is never a good decision. You should select it based on ROI. Many times the most expensive software provides the highest return on investment and is indeed the best choice!

Listen to their concerns and try to resolve them. There are several books you can provide but one of my favorites is *Who moved my cheese* by Kenneth Blanchard. (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1998)

Most technology projects last six to 12 months and in my experience natural employee turnover often solves the issue of job redundancy. One client of mine publicly stated that no employees would lose their jobs. Through natural attrition and growth in his business this indeed was the case.



When implementing new technology, know what you're getting into and make sure you have the foundation to successfully complete the project. A small investment in an unbiased consulting firm that will provide guidance and leadership is probably the best investment you can make to ensure your project is successful.



A consultant's job

People always ask me what I do as a consultant. I was always taught that you need an "elevator pitch" or you'll never sell yourself. After reading this article, you can see why it's difficult to squeeze these concepts into a 60-second pitch. Studies of cognitive process show that the more exposure you have to a situation, the less likely you will see things that are obvious to someone new to the same situation. As a consultant, I examine companies with a fresh set of eyes, looking for the things managers might have overlooked.



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