A Fool with a Tool Is Still a Fool

By MICHAEL MENARD, Author, A Fish in Your Ear: The New Discipline of Project Portfolio Management

Any software you implement in your organization should enable or enhance a business process. Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believe that the software or technology itself is the solution, when in reality, technology is at best 10 percent of the value equation — the other 90 percent is based on the human factor.

Knowing this, it’s no wonder 70 percent of technology implementations fail. In other words, seven out of ten applications that are installed and that companies spend millions of dollars for the implementation aren’t being used one year later. Talk about wasted resources!

How does this happen? All too often, company or department leaders hear about new software and view it as the “next shiny thing.” They call the software provider and say, “We heard you have a great tool and we’d like a demonstration.” The software is certainly seductive with its bells and whistles, but its effectiveness and usefulness depend upon the validity of the information going in and how the people actually work with it. Having a tool is great, but remember that a fool with a tool is still a fool (and sometimes a dangerous fool).

So if technology is not the answer, what is? The answer that will really solve organizational challenges and enable business processes consists of three parts that, when done correctly in conjunction, will lead to long lasting results.

1. Get the business process design right before you implement any software.

The first step to a smart technology implementation is to get clear on what information goes in and what analysis comes out, which has nothing to do with software itself. This is called business process design. Unfortunately, many companies fail to align technology with their processes. That's because some companies have no processes, while others have a stated process (the one they talk about) and an emergent process (the one they actually do).So what is a business process and how do you design one?

A process is like a recipe. If you have a great recipe for New York-style cheesecake that calls for folding in three eggs one at a time, yet you decide to blend in all three eggs at once, you'll get a completely different (and probably not very good) end product than if you had followed the directions. Make the recipe again and follow the instructions in the proper order, and your cheesecake will be edible.

If you do anything more than twice in your organization, you should define a process for it. Once you have done so, you should continue to improve upon it. Inthe absence of a defined and documented process, subsequent actionsbecome experimental. Process design is an investment that's easy tounderstand. But while the idea of it usually gets an enthusiasticresponse, actually doing itgets shelved.

So prior to any software implementation, map out your business processes and define such things as:

1. What do we want from the software?
2. How will this software be used on a daily basis in our organization?
3. Which business processes will the software affect?
4. Who will be using the software?
5. Who has the authority to make decisions about the software and the information it produces?
6. Who will be responsible for inputting the needed data and making sure it's accurate?
7. Who will be receiving the data and acting upon it?
8. How will the data inform our future business decisions?

The clearer you get on business process design and how the software ties in, the better your results will be.

2. Choose the right technology.

No company can do the things it's called upon to do without technology, so some sort of technology is a must. We all need tools. If you've done step one, you'll have a clear picture of your business and how the new software must play a role. Now it's time to analyze your software options and choose the one that complements your business processes and will deliver the results you've outlined.

3. Implement the tool into the organization so it has rapid uptake and the shortest time to value.

This third step is the most important because it's about the human factor and how it impacts any organizational change—and implementing new technology is a big change. Unfortunately, too many companies today are simply doing installations. But "installation," which means "to put something in place" is very different than "implementation," which means "to put something into effector action." Having a new car in the driveway is nice, but if you can't drive that car, it doesn't offer much value.

Implementations often fail because companies forget the human factor. In fact, in most changes, human factors pose the greatest risks to long-term profitability. New knowledge and behavior-adoption drive ROI.

Why is change so difficult? Because most of us like comfort. We may complain about routine, but the majority of folks secretly like it. And almost any organizational change threatens our existing comfort zone. Change requires movement from what we know to what we don't yet know. Like people, organizational cultures prefer to remain the same. That's why even changes directed at entire departments or organizations, rather than specific individuals, often meet resistance.

So why bother with change when the odds of success stacked against it? The answer is simple. All businesses must continually change or they will die. The markets demand change; customers demandchange. Therefore, you either instigate change or it will happen to you. David Nielson, a leading authority on organizational change says to better prepare your team for change and have a successful implementation, be sure you do the following six things:

1. Communicate the business case for the change
2. Identify internal change agents (allies) and engage with them
3. Educate and support the change agents
4. Assess adoption readiness
5. Define and support effective behavior
6. Execute a communication plan about the change

Remember, implementation will fail unless sufficient time and resources are allocated to the process of learning. These six steps form the foundation of successfulimplementation. Miss one and you're asking for trouble.

Make Your Technology Implementations Work

The message is clear: Technology is not *the* answer. Yes, it's an important piece of the puzzle, but it's not the all-encompassing solution so many people believe it to be. If you just focus on the tool, you may end up the fool; but if you focus on the business, the tool, and the people within the organization who will be using the tool, you'll be the leader who not only uses technology effectively, but who also sees

great gains in productivity and profits.

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