Software implementations: Pin in the eye, or feather in the cap?

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As real estate organizations continue to adopt new technology solutions, they are becoming more sophisticated with regard to their understanding of the implementation process. What I am referring to is the level of understanding they have surrounding what happens after the software is purchased: installation with reconfigurations to manage the business of leases, charges, receipts, and all the other things these packages can do for them. Our Professional Services Group is even starting to hear CTOs and CIOs talk about "change management," "delivery management" and "current state, future state gap planning" before we even have a chance to raise the concepts. To this we say "Here, Here!" and we are glad that so many real estate companies are starting to share the relevant nomenclature around what is involved in planning and executing a successful software implementation project. Although I am waxing positively here on the maturity gained in the real estate community on these matters, I should add that there is in fact still a population of executive level project sponsors and owners who make the decision to buy software and then say "ok, let me know when it is over."

Considering the wide range of attitudes about software implementation, let me share a few concepts that we find go a long way in determining whether implementation will result as a pin in your eye, or a feather in your cap.

Every project needs a sponsor

In New York, the term "sponsor" usually refers to someone who converted a rental property to a co-op or condominium. However, to those in the world of project implementation, the sponsor is the person who is ultimately responsible for selecting the right product and overseeing an efficient implementation for the organization purchasing the software. Ultimate responsibilityâ€¦ wow, there is a provocative term. For owner/managers, the sponsor is usually the owner, but the owner may not always be the best option depending on their involvement in the day to day operation of the business. In the case of fee managers, it can get tricky to identify the right sponsor because there can sometimes be an unwillingness to take on these types of projects, as they are often accompanied by a fear of responsibility for how they may turn out. The sponsor needs to be someone who has access to quick decision making and the ability to deal effectively with all areas of the organization. It is especially helpful if the sponsor has power within the organization and is able to motivate people to take on the work required by the project. The sponsor is ultimately the key advocate for change.

Set the right resource expectations

Regardless of project size, execution is something that is initiated by the organization, not something that initiates itself. It is very important that management understands that their project team and sponsor will be spending some quotient of their hours every week on the implementation

project. Many companies do not plan properly for this, and when people are called upon, there is resentment or worse, they are unable to adequately focus on critical project elements such as, converted data, change processes, or the effect on others within the organization. The usual result from all that is a delayed project timeline and more pins than feathers.

Don't try to recreate everything you presently do. With an absence of the prior two tips, such a project may only result in a recreation of what you did before you implemented the new system. Many companies have created work flows and processes that are designed to work around inadequacies of legacy products, and it is often more troublesome and expensive to try to hold onto those old procedures on systems that utilize the latest technology.

One key is to see the process separate from the software. For example, paying invoices is what you need to do, but how you do it on your current software is something that can be changed and adapted within the context of a new system workflow.

This may seem obvious, but when you sit with an A/P person to explain to them that they will need to change a process they have been comfortable with for the past 10 years, you may have to address the response "this software won't work for me" or brace yourself when they burst into tears.

Dream a little and manage change

The key to a successful change is the ability to grasp all of the challenges of a software implementation project and use them to your advantage. One way to do this is to dream about what your business can become through the utilization of new technologies.

These visions of the future will sustain the effort when you are struggling with the natural resistance to change. It is hard to justify when everyone is barking about the new payables process unless you can speak about things like better cost controls, online approvals and automatic budget checking and how that will improve your service offering and bottom line. You will wonder at times why you are going through new A/R procedures until you remember that it will provide a platform for online payments, quicker availability of cash and better performing properties.

Much success will flow from making the right software and vendor selection. Market success and product maturity are guiding factors there. But when it is time to get the project done, follow the guiding principles above and increase the likelihood that you will look back on the project as a feather in your cap!

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