"Technology & Change" by Bob Popiak

Competition is the motivator driving efficiencies and productivity in any company. Change is the key ingredient necessary to either keep up with or stay ahead of the competition. What worked in the past is no longer applicable in today's fast paced world. The old processes and systems are simply too cumbersome and inefficient. Today, technology is driving change. From giant consolidators to the local homebuilder, technology is ubiquitous. The challenge for us is to determine what changes are needed, what changes are wanted, and most importantly, what is available and the costs involved in making these changes.

Many articles praise the virtues of one system's functionality over another's or argue that one vendor produces more reliable hardware than its competitor. What it boils down to is, which processes and systems will best meet the needs of your organization? Every business is unique in its culture, personnel and resources. How we meld these intangibles with today's technology is the challenge. There is no magic wand to wave. There are, however, various techniques that are useful in meeting this challenge. One simple technique that may be used to recognize (and categorize) your company's requirements is the three "S's": Standards, Sameness and Simplicity.

This tool is useful in identifying and assessing corporate needs. Moreover, it's an invaluable tool to help develop the strategy necessary to implement systems and processes.

STANDARDS

You only have to go down to your local computer store to see the wide variety of operating systems, software packages and hardware devices available for business use. The challenge is in picking the products that meet your needs. Hardware needs are based on availability, resource expertise and cost. By first selecting a corporate standard, you will be able to narrow the selection field and, in the long run, reduce your total operating cost. You will no longer require experts in a multitude of disciplines, your information technology (IT) team's expertise will increase and operating downtime will actually decrease because of their ability to quickly get the right part or machine. Standards can extend beyond hardware issues. Other areas may include telecommunications, operating systems, office software and networks.

SAMENESS

Having your entire company on the same platform, using the same applications on the same databases, makes support, development and training much easier for those involved. Whether it is a customized application or a turnkey package, keeping everyone on the same page, with the same version, establishes a standard workflow process for the entire company to follow. Sameness also allows for the quick and easy access of information throughout the company.

SIMPLICITY

Many of you are already familiar with the number of vendors involved in the telecommunications arena: local service, long distance, Internet, cellular and data. Simplifying your list to one or two vendors helps provide tremendous leverage to your organization in acquiring the lowest cost available. If you look at your expenditures, you'll find that there are some real savings to be had by consolidating vendors. Simplifying your vendor list will also make it easier for you to get responses and attention from them when needed.

Using a three "S" technique is only one tool in realizing the requirements needed in your organization. It goes a long way in helping to identify and prioritize your needs, estimate your costs and most importantly, prepare your staff for the inevitable change. The next challenge will be to develop a strategy to actually implement the plan and simplify the entire process.

The first step in the implementation process is to devise a plan that is both manageable and realistic. To accomplish this goal you need to understand three very important factors: 1) Personnel—their skills and roles; 2) Culture—the organization's readiness for change; and 3) Resources—how much money is available and how much time there is to accomplish your goals. Ongoing communication and education throughout the company is paramount. This makes the transition a bit easier by setting the tone for what to expect and when to expect it.

PERSONNEL

With plan in hand, you can begin to assess the departments and individuals who will be impacted first. Working with this group, you will need to conduct an "As-Is" analysis of the current situation. Once this analysis is completed, you will then need to focus on the "To-Be" scenario, the vision of the department operating under the new system. The "To-Be" scenario then becomes your roadmap and also serves as a guide to the total scope of changes impacting the organization. That impact may take the form of workflow changes, reorganizing departments or simply retraining employees. One thing that is certain is that key individuals will be required to drive changes. The downside is that the efforts by these individuals, as well as others, may disrupt normal day-to-day activities.

CULTURE

The "culture" of a company plays a major role in the success and timeliness of your changes. Willingness to change can be one of many issues that will help in determining the overall implementation period. If a company is of the mind-set that, "We are doing fine, why change?" then the transition period will be rather lengthy. Along with education and communication, having company executives take an active role in supporting the plan goes a long way toward making the changes successful.

RESOURCES

To pull together the entire project requires having the necessary skill sets available. These skills may cover a wide spectrum of disciplines, including project management, analysis, training,

technical writing and technical administration. Employees with these skills may be available internally; if not, you may have to use specialized consultants or look outside your company to recruit for key positions. Another option, if you don't wish to manage the hardware or software internally, is to use an Application Service Provider that will house and maintain the systems for you, freeing your team to focus on work process improvements.

The amount of time, money and energy expended as well as the anticipated returns will vary by the metrics that you choose to monitor. System changes are mostly soft benefits that are often times hard to calculate. The only direct measure is what is placed at the bottom line. The real savings occur when the hardware and software have been installed, the work processes changed to reflect the new workflows, the management team committed to ensuring the project's success, and most importantly, the workforce dedicated to adapt and leverage the system so that it continually improves. Will technological changes improve your financials? You bet they will! But it will take time—time to change your organization to make it more responsive, more efficient and more productive.

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