8 Pitfalls to avoid when buying a computer system

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1. **Buy it to fix a management problem**. If you don't have a good paper system; if your employees aren't disciplined enough to use it consistently, don't expect a computer to solve your problem. For example: The tale of two lumber yards. Both have great inventory tracking systems. However, one lumber yard system is never accurate, the other is almost dead on. Why? Because employees don't consistently enter returns, sales, and culls from inventory. Be prepared to be disciplined in the implementation of a computer or live with the old adage-garbage in-garbage out!
2. **Not embracing the changes required by the new computer system**. Each computer system has a vendor designed flow and process. If you impose a computer system on top of an existing process—manual or automated, and do not adjust the existing and related process, you may be caught doing double work.
3. **Failing to consider the value of connectedness in the organization.** Vendors create products to appeal to specific market segments. However, your business is not a market segment—it is a process flow—with required connection points from sales—to production—to finance. Best of breed is a great strategy, for optimizing individual functions, but it will breed a host of increasingly complex interfaces in order to remain efficient. One change in an upstream system can create a cascade of maintenance or problems in succeeding downstream systems. Consider whether optimization of the whole is better than optimizing a single function.
4. **Not Planning for re-implementation and ongoing training** – No matter how perfect the pre-implementation training, oragnizational knowledge of how to use the system will deteriorate—either because people forget how to perform certain less frequently performed, or more complex tasks, or the people who were trained on the correct use of the system quit or are promoted. In either case, part of the cost of a well run computer application is regular re-training.
5. **Conflicting objectives**. It might make political sense for a new project to propose lots of benefits to lots of different interest groups within an organization. After all, its easier to gather support from all those self-interested parties. But it also can easily result in the proverbial "biting off more than you can chew". While it is useful to strategize at a big picture level, and have a game plan for how each piece might fit together, its also important to the results side of the equation to narrowly target a clear business problem, and organize the implementation around that—delivering benefits to the organization as rapidly as possible, then circling back, building on your success, and picking up another aspect of the project to implement. It is not unusual that 80% or more of a project benefit can result from as little as 20% of a project's effort. If possible organize projects to deliver that 80% in the first 20% of their budget and life.
6. **Buying to "save money".** It is rare that a computer system will actually "save" money. First, depending on the complexity of the system, it can take your organization as long as 2 years to become proficient with the new system and begin to achieve the anticipated economies. What usually happens is that the new system captures more information, or provides efficiency in scale—allowing the company to process more transactions.
7. **Falling in love with the latest and greatest**. The early adopters pay a high price for being the first. In addition to shouldering a greater share of the cost of development, as the product moves from its unique position to a commodity, you will also pick up a greater share of process kinks, bugs to work around. And there is always the risk of being stuck with a product that the vendor either does not support or is changing to better fit a larger market.

8. **Embracing Self Service without considering the real cost.** Data processing used to be the exclusive domain of techies. Input and output operations were conducted by professionals who by training and experience gained the ability to perform tasks on the computer with speed and efficiency. The advent of the PC appeared to allow for a transfer of responsibility for input and output to users, since the user now had the physical hardware on their desk. However, modern computers and software are hundreds of times more sophisticated than the old technology that was the exclusive domain of the techie. Many IT vendors have embraced and sold the idea of self service as a way to reduce the backlog of requests in the IT department. Unfortunately, much of the software sold for self service, such as Crystal Business Objects remains out of reach of the ordinary person because it is too complex to master with casual use. Thus, executives and managers who fall victim to a poorly planned self service strategy are compelled to spend large amounts of their time producing at best, rudimentary results, when concentrating all the requests for this input and output processing on a couple of techies would have served the organization more efficiently and freed the manager to do what they do best--manage! Self service as a concept flies directly in the face of all conventional wisdom and experience upon which efficient mass production is based. Not saying it can't be done, but it is tricky.

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