

Seven Sins of Technology Selection

By Brett LaDove

How many times have you been involved in a software selection process that turns into an arm wrestling match between stakeholders? Have you ever been part of a process where, in the middle of negotiations with a systems vendor, you find out that the costs to do what you want to do are WAY more than you had anticipated? Have you ever experienced significant time delays in the selection process? How about having gone through the whole selection, negotiation, and implementation phases only to have the tool you purchased go underutilized (or even unutilized!), or found that you've outgrown it right from the start?

In some regards, the frequency of struggles and failures in this realm is understandable. People with increasingly diverse backgrounds are finding themselves in positions of needing to automate parts of their business unit. While they may be technically savvy, conducting a full blown selection is probably a fairly infrequent occurrence. If the project leader doesn't have the guidance of an expert, have a well defined process, or truly understand what happens at each stage, there are bound to be more than a few surprises along the way. The good news though, is that the threat of failure can be significantly mitigated by avoiding seven common pitfalls.

The Seven Sins:

1. Taking short cuts when defining and prioritizing requirements

It all starts here. In our 'quick fix' society, it seems everyone is looking for a short cut. Like so many things in life though... if you want to get in shape, build wealth, or make a successful software selection, you generally have to just do the work.

The most important part of this work is determining what it is you are trying to achieve. I'm a big fan of an opportunity driven process, where the benefits (and reduction of cost) helps to inform your objectives, strategy, and the scope and budget of your project.

Where shortcutting is most evident is when organizations look for systems vendors to tell them what they need to do. Realistically, you are by default buying some business process within any system, but you need to determine which processes you need to automate to help you most effectively and efficiently achieve your objectives and strategies. What tends to differentiate vendors in a particular space is the way in which they approach the problem, and the processes they support.

Until you really define your own business goals, it will simply be difficult to assess the best approach to achieving them.

2. Narrowing the field too early

Talking to systems vendors early in the process is great for informing requirements and stimulating ideas. If you start from a short list of 'likely candidates', you won't get the full benefit of this idea generation, and you might not have the right vendor in the mix once you're ready to make a selection.

If you're concerned by the time commitment in exploring too many vendors, it may be because you've already committed the fifth sin (see below). Exploration at the early stages should be broad (across a variety of systems in the space), and at a fairly high level.

3. Not providing enough clarity for vendor proposals

If you don't tell the vendors specifically how to respond (or provide a template), you're going to quickly find yourself in a situation where you are stuck comparing apples to oranges (this applies to capabilities and pricing). Also, you're more likely to get a 'capabilities statement' than an actual proposal...which is effectively useless in determining how their tool would support your requirements.

4. Not knowing, in advance, what you want to happen at each step of the process

If you're only looking one move ahead at any given time, you are almost guaranteed to have delays and confusion in your process. Knowing how you plan to analyze the proposals, for example, will influence how you develop the RFP.

When the proposal responses are returned, is usually when the problems first come to light. The causes of these problems, however, have happened much earlier in the process. On several occasions, clients have hired me at this point to analyze the proposals. Unfortunately, however, getting the project back on track usually requires going a little further back in the process and re-building the foundation that they tried to gloss over.

5. Getting into the details too soon

It's all too easy to get buried in the details when you're dealing with complex sets of requirements and capabilities. Evaluating solutions according to how well they will meet a clearly defined set of objectives and strategies is much easier than trying to evaluate solutions against a multitude of individual stakeholder visions. When stakeholders have even slightly different opinions as to what the tool needs to do, a vendor review will quickly become a tug-o-war.

Use a template for matching requirements and capabilities. Don't expect that stakeholders will be able to read a set of requirements, then read three or four 'capabilities statements' (or even proposals), and be able to map, merge, and analyze the data in their head.

Once you've analyzed vendor responses to your specific requirements (which you've received in such a way that you can analyze them ...see sin #3), and you've narrowed the field, only now will you need to get into the detail of any particular system – as you validate the responses of vendors on your short list.

6. Setting an unrealistic timeline

Sometimes it takes a week or two to get all the right people together. If you don't plan for simple realities like this, you'll be behind schedule from day one.

Unrealistically ambitious timelines tend to result in: projects that are: over-budget and behind schedule, suboptimal implementations, and frustrated personnel.

7. Selecting a vendor for the wrong reason

When several of the aforementioned pitfalls are not successfully avoided this seventh pitfall is often a forgone conclusion. If a selection team plows forward, despite having committed several of the described sins, decisions tend to come down to a variety of secondary considerations. A system might be selected because of: the glitz of its bells and whistles; a good rapport with the sales representative; or because the system is well known. (“Nobody ever got fired for hiring IBM”.) These factors should perhaps have some bearing on your decision, but really, the primary reason should be...because the system will help you achieve your goals and objectives. Sadly, without a strong and diligently managed process, with a heavy emphasis on the upfront planning, selections often come down to what can feel like a flip of a coin.

A good selection process comes down to building a solid foundation. If you clearly understand what you are trying to do, as well as define and diligently manage to a realistic selection process, you will save time and money, and improve your chances of success. Or, put another way, time invested up front will pay off throughout the selection, negotiation, and implementation phases, and in the business results that you will be able to achieve.

Bio:

Brett LaDove is a management consultant focusing on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Customer Care. He has provided insight and support to a variety of Fortune 1000 companies, and aided them in their quests to achieve customer satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy.

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