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How to implement your new computer software successfully

By

Dani Kaplan

Abstract: The previous article in this series "How to Choose the Right Software for your Company," was published in the July issue of Progressive Distributor Magazine:

<http://www.progressivedistributor.com/progressive/archives/E-business/ChooseRightSoftware.htm>

It addressed the steps necessary when searching for new computer software. Once the new software is selected, the difficult phase of implementing it begins, which is the topic in this article.



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The first step that should be taken immediately after the software contracts are signed is to define who will assume “ownership” of the new software installation. Assuming the “ownership” of this process will result in increased responsibilities and very long days for the chosen team. Besides having to complete their normal daily tasks, the new role will require learning the new system, making sure the users are trained and the necessary software modifications are done prior to “going live.”

The following steps are necessary for a successful software implementation:

- Selecting who will assume “ownership” of the software implementation.
- Defining what software modifications are required to “go live.”
- Assuring users’ comfort level before “going live.”

Selecting who will assume “ownership” of the software implementation

The most important factor in a successful software implementation is choosing the right “players” on the team that will assume “ownership” of the new software project. Very often, having a person who is afraid of learning new technology will result in delays in the software implementation which can cause business disruptions.

Using a computer system for many years creates a comfort level that can result in fear and resistance to learning the new system. Choosing strong people for the team that will assume “ownership” of the new system will result in a timely and successful implementation. On the other hand, companies who don’t choose strong team players frequently end up with delayed implementation and the users losing confidence in the new system.

One company that purchased a new computer system selected a weak computer manager to be in charge of the new software implementation. This manager, who was happy with his 20 year old computer system, did not see any reason to replace it with a new one. When he didn’t get his way, he resisted learning the new software. This resulted in delays in implementation of the new system. When speaking with the company president about this subject, I advised him to appoint a different person to head the software implementation. The president agreed with me and said: “I can see your point, but I can’t do what you are suggesting. The computer manager is related to me and following your advice will result in a family rift.” The delays in the software implementation resulted in the users losing interest in the computer project and going back to do their daily work rather than getting trained and practice on the new system.



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Two other companies who bought the same software from the same vendor a year later appointed very strong computer managers to head the software implementation team. The managers got trained as soon as the project started and set up time tables for the users to be trained, including practice time. Both companies had a very successful implementation and went “live” with the new system while the first company was still lagging behind. Viewing the successful companies’ implementation reveals the following facts:

1. All three companies purchased the identical software from the same vendor and were trained by the same software house personnel.
2. The two successful companies’ computer managers got trained right away, spent long days in the office insuring the software implementation was going according to plan and made sure the users practiced right after each training session.
3. In the unsuccessful installation, the computer manager did not assume “ownership” for the software implementation and “dragged” his feet when it was time for him to be trained. The company’s end users, seeing him being reluctant to learn the new system, followed his lead and lost interest in the new system. Instead of getting trained and practicing regularly, they chose to ignore the computer project and do their daily work.

The two successful companies prove how important it is to have strong leaders to assume “ownership” of implementing the new computer system. Not having strong leadership prevents the users, who are already overworked and understaffed, from assuming their “ownership” of the new software through training and practice, which results in delayed implementation.

Defining what software modifications are required to “go live”

One of the main reasons for delays and overrun of new software implementation are the last minute changes and requests for new modification. Being a creature of habits we all need the level of comforts of what we had before. When discussing the new software functions very often the users will request modification to the new software based of what the old software offered without evaluating what the new software has to offer.

The first step that should be taken when discussing modification is reviewing what is available in the new system and study if it will meet the business requirements. Some time what looks like a necessary modification can be avoided by seeing if business procedures can be changes. Very often modification that are a “must” prior to “going live” become secondary after the users get used to the new system and are not used.

After the business needs are reviewed and the software modifications list is established, a priority list should be written what must be done before the “going live” date vs. it will be “nice to have” in the new system. The “must be done” software modification should be finished before the “going live” date while the “nice to have” modifications should be reviewed again after “going live” with the new system. This will insure that the software implementation was finished on time and the estimated budget was met. As a rule of thumb the



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most successful installation are the once that head of departments and the computer department manager team up together to decided what modification are needed and what is a realistic time table to “go live” with the new system.

Assuring users comfort level before “going live.”

Before the “going live” date with the new system, user knowledge level and confidence with the new software should be evaluated. Just because the data conversion and the software modification results are satisfactory is no guarantee that it’s the right time to “go live” with the new system. One of the main reasons for a “rocky” implementation resulting in business disruptions is the human factor when the users are not proficient enough with the new software.

One month before the “going live” date a company-wide test should be conducted in which all users create common daily errors in the computer system’s “test environment.” This test will indicate whether the users are ready to use the new system or if more training is needed. If the users need assistance to fix the mistakes they created, the “going live” date should be postponed for additional user training and practice. Postponing the “going live” date will insure that everyone is proficient with the new system and prevent later business disruptions. Premature “going live” often results in company-wide disruptions.

Summary

The successful installation of new software requires a strong team that will assume “ownership” of the new system. User training, software modifications and data conversion should be evaluated at every stage of the implementation process. Establishing target completion dates for each task and evaluating the results will insure a successful software implementation in a timely manner and within the allocated budget.

The “going live” date should always be a tentative date until all tasks set forward are met and confirmed to be successful. Pre-mature “going live” will create a “domino effect” of business disruption starting with delayed and inaccurate shipments and ending with company-wide business disruptions.

Many of the horror stories heard about bad software implementation could have been avoided by careful project planning and a strong management team who assume “ownership” of the new computer system. Choosing this management team correctly will make the difference between a successful implementation and yet another horror story of an unsuccessful computer installation.

Since 1980, Dani Kaplan has been working with manufacturers, distributors and retailers as a trusted advisor - helping them lower their operating costs, streamline operations and take control of their inventory. Dani can be reached at 917-647-2466 or by visiting <http://www.smcddata.com/>