

Big Or Small—There's No Escape

Technology Must Be Part Of Your Business Strategy

by Wendy Gauntt

Organizations, no matter their size, often approach technology as an afterthought. This is especially baffling given today's marketplace where businesses cannot succeed without well-executed technology integration.

The small-business owner in particular can be a breeding ground of technology frustrations. With pinched resources and minimal time, how can the small-business owner keep up with ever-evolving changes in technology? No wonder they are discouraged; problems regularly appear and everyone has his/her share of failed past experiences. The challenge becomes: How can we integrate technology into our strategy and ensure success in achieving objectives?

Maybe you've run into some of these common issues...

The Language Barrier

With all the technical jargon and acronyms in use today, it often seems that technology specialists are speaking a different dialect. If a high-tech language barrier causes you any sleepless nights, you would be well served by a skilled professional who translates technology into business opportunities while speaking *your* language. Seek out the advice of friends and colleagues to find someone whom you can trust.

Are My Objectives Clear?

How will new software add value to our performance? Is it measurable? Poorly defined decisions based on "everyone's talking about it" or "it's the next big thing" will most likely miss your bottom-line objectives. This isn't leading edge technology, it's bleeding edge. Following this strategy greatly increases your costs and risks. Always set clear and tangible goals for any new technology you put in place.

My Employees Feel Ambushed

A third common issue when integrating new technology is your employees' feeling that they are not in the loop. If there is poor or no communication about new equipment and processes, your actions may appear like a covert maneuver. The likely reaction will be to resist the change and question the intentions.

Employees will naturally fear the unknown; at worst they may be concerned about their job security. You can reassure them by explaining the benefit of the new technology while implementing careful and thorough training. Prior to any purchasing decision, ask for employee input. Spell out what you want to accomplish, and then describe new options in technology that may attain that result. Ask for reactions, questions and suggestions.

You can provide additional encouragement by noting that new technology frees employees to perform more valuable and strategic work. And for the business owner, it may delay the need for additional hires.

Understanding The Options

Technology's strength lies in processing, tracking and distributing data, all at lightning speed. Think about how this applies to your business. What activities are repetitive and time-consuming? What do you have stored in your files, on the shelf, or in your head? What information do you need at your fingertips to make informed business decisions? The right system can automate tedious processes, manage your data, share it with others and report results.

When sorting out technology options, remember that computers are very literal. They do exactly what you tell them to do; they aren't yet smart enough to read between the lines and figure out what you really wanted. In order to implement a satisfactory system you must

clearly articulate the results you want to achieve and the process you want to use.

An Example—Technology Links Business Objectives

Let's suppose your objective is to "Increase business with existing customers by finding more ways to build relationships."

In this case, a customer relationship management database (CRM) may be the option for you. Tracking information is a key asset in a CRM system. Activities with all your customers are closely tracked, from phone calls to marketing efforts to sales orders. You can set up automated processes to remind your employees to call customers who haven't ordered for 6 months, or whose payments are overdue.

Distribution of data is put to work in several ways; the most obvious is employee access to the same database of customer information. But you can also perform personalized marketing through targeted e-mails, newsletters and custom offers. Through e-mail marketing, you can review results of your promotion campaigns, as well as examine the impact.

Simplifying The System For Value And Efficiencies

To get the most value in time and cost-savings when introducing new technology, remember a few final tips:

- Integrate your systems as much as is practical. Using one system that handles 80% to 90% of your needs is preferable to two different systems that handle 95%.
- Use packaged software rather than custom developed software, especially for back-office functions like accounting, purchasing, sales and human resources. Unless your business process is truly

unique, you will avoid headaches by adapting your business processes to a prewritten package.

your business objectives with the appropriate and most cost-effective technology support.

Keys To Success

- Treat technology investments like any other business outlay—evaluate the costs against the benefits.
- Use someone who will help you align

- Be targeted and focused; know what results you plan to achieve.

Wendy Gauntt, (wendy@cioservicesllc.com) president of CIO Services, LLC, talks your business's language, as she helps design and implement technologies aligned with performance objectives.