

Don't Overlook the Details When Purchasing New Software

BY FRED ODE

At one time or another, everyone has fallen victim to overlooking important details—the fine print of a 50-page contract, a new hire who looked great on paper but failed to perform, or a weather forecast for three weeks of nonstop rain. Hindsight, as they say, is always 20/20.

Likewise, when it comes to selecting new construction software, contractors should consider more than obvious short-term needs, like a system's look and feel, features and cost. The following are four essential, yet often overlooked, factors to consider.

THE COMPANY BEHIND THE PRODUCT

Successful contractors must adapt to change and innovation. In recent years, many software vendors have been involved in rollups or acquisitions, with large invest-

ment groups often purchasing competitors. In some cases, vendors decide to stop supporting certain software products, leaving users in a jam.

This speaks volumes about a software company's viability and longevity. Just as contractors should check out the organizational background of potential business partners, they also should investigate the history and reputation of prospective software vendors.

Aside from product-specific questions, construction technology shoppers should learn about a vendor's investment in new product development, long-term goals, annual profitability and length of time serving the construction industry. If a contractor wants a product that will perform well into the future, then it cannot ignore the company behind the product.

THE VENDOR'S COMMITMENT TO CLIENTS

Training and technical support are two essential ingredients for successful software implementation, yet many contractors give little thought to this aspect of their purchase.

Reputable software companies are not simply motivated to sell their software and then move on to the next sale. Rather, they want contractors to be satisfied, long-term customers. They want users to understand the product and take advantage of its full potential. To offer this requires a well-trained staff that understands construction and how contractors operate.

Unfortunately, not all software companies take customer support and satisfaction seriously. Because software companies have a bad reputation for leaving callers on hold or failing to answer technical questions in a timely manner, contractors must ask how quickly they answer support calls, what type of training they use, whether they offer flexible solutions to unique problems and whether they offer opportunities to network with other users.

When it comes to purchasing new software—which usually involves a learning curve and the potential to change how people work—contractors should feel confident that their vendor will be available. It makes sense to invest in a software product backed by a customer-focused company.

THE TECHNOLOGY BEHIND THE PRODUCT

Most software buyers don't bother to

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consider the technology that makes their application work. Many programs don't handle as many features and functions as automatically as they claim. Other programs claim to use current technology, but behind their user-friendly menu lurks outdated technology.

How efficiently and reliably software performs is based almost entirely on a program's underlying technology, so contractors should identify if a product is written using current programming. Some contractors claim DOS-based legacy systems fully meet their needs. However, buyers need to be aware that DOS-based systems offer limited storage capacity and processing speed when compared to newer systems. Developers of these aging systems have found ways to add storage capacity and features to their programs, but at the cost of efficiency and manageability.

Newer software products, meanwhile, can take advantage of unlimited storage space and fast speeds, and concentrate on creating the features most important to contractors.

Another important consideration for buyers is the software's database platform. A system's database not only stores information, but it also drives data input and output and is responsible for efficiency, stability and security. Older systems, and many inexpensive, off-the-shelf systems, generally use what is called a proprietary database. Aside from being unable to readily share data, proprietary databases are not as powerful and robust as newer databases.

Many newer and midrange systems use an open database that shares a common language (e.g., Structured Query Language or SQL) and allows for fast and seamless integration of data.

As a rule of thumb, the more transactions contractors complete, the more powerful and robust their databases need to be. Aside from speed and performance issues, the database is key when it comes to integration of data, data security, search ability and reporting capabilities.

THE COMPANY'S READINESS TO BUY

Unsuccessful software implementations have nothing to do with the product in use. According to one recent study, more than 90 percent of implementation failures occur due to human and organizational reasons. From limited budgeting and poor planning to user refusal and unrealistic timetables, companies manage to sabotage their best intentions for adopting new technology.

Aside from starting with a realistic budget that will allow the company to meet specific goals now and in the future, contractors must include software end-users in the decision-making process. Not only does this increase the likelihood that employees will embrace the new system, but these front-line people also may provide valuable input regarding which products best fit the company's current business methods.

Equally important, contractors must consider the abilities and attitudes of all end-users. Nothing stops software implementation faster than an employee who is unwilling or unable to change.

Contractors also must be realistic about the schedule for implementing new software. It takes time to set up and install a new program, but it is time well spent because creating customized, user-defined fields inevitably will save unnecessary keystrokes and mouse clicks down the road.

In addition, the implementation timetable needs to allow for ongoing user training. Expecting employees to learn a new software program after a few hours of training—squeezed in between their regular duties and tasks—is unrealistic.

Armed with a list of must-have features, a realistic budget and these four considerations, any contractor should feel confident that a best-fit software product is close at hand.

Fred Ode is CEO of Foundation Software, Brunswick, Ohio. For more information, call (800) 246-0800, email fred@foundationsoft.com or visit www.foundationsoft.com.