

Don't Curse The Computer

Computer crashes and lost documents, viruses and pop-ups, unhelpful help-desks and hard-to-understand documentation—technology can be frustrating for everyone, even for advanced users. For novice users and the cyber phobic, it can be downright scary.

Despite the frustrations—and fear—that technology can bring, it does help people accomplish a great deal more in far less time. Business owners and managers have no choice but to find ways to use technology to improve their businesses now and in the future.

WHY TECHNOLOGIES FAIL

In most cases, technology does not fail; the methodology used to select it fails. Many view new technology purchases as quick fixes to isolated problems instead of integrated and practical, long-term solutions.

Relying on outdated technology also can present a big problem, especially in construction. For example, contractors that are proud of their “sophisticated” use of spreadsheets for job costing and estimating have no idea how inefficient these methods have become. Twenty-six years after the first spreadsheet program was introduced, industry-specific applications can now handle specialized functions faster, easier and at relatively low costs. If a contractor still uses spreadsheets for accounting or estimating functions, the last thing he should consider is PDAs in the field or document imaging in the office.

Every business, at any given time, reaches a certain threshold in its use of technology and must identify where the company is, and take aim at where it would like to be. There is nothing wrong with being behind in technology, as long as something is being done to close the gap.

In his book, “Good to Great,” Jim Collins studied Fortune 500 companies over a five-year period and described what distinguishes good to great companies from all the rest.

“The good-to-great companies used technology as an accelerator of momentum, not a creator of it,” he said. In other words, technology in and of itself will do nothing for a business; it will only accelerate what the company already does well.

TECHNOLOGY SUCCESS IS AS EASY AS ‘GAP’

Following is a practical, common-sense methodology to find what technology helps a business become even better, called GAP, or gather, analyze and plan.

1) GATHER. The gather phase is the most lengthy and time-consuming, but also the most important, and no person or process should be left out.

Who must be included in the gather stage? If possible, every single employee, or at the very least, department managers, should be interviewed. Gathered information comes from two types of questions:

- *Fact questions* help define job descriptions, tasks, technologies currently used, reports used and prepared regularly and procedures in place.
- *Concern questions* examine frustrations, redundancies and inefficiencies.

In addition, it’s important to talk to technology suppliers (such as network and hardware suppliers) and construction-specific technology suppliers (including project management, estimating and job-cost accounting software vendors). Finally, interview people outside the company who are affected by the technologies, or lack of, including clients, subcontractors, lenders, attorneys and CPAs.

2) ANALYZE. In many cases, the researcher will have a “eureka” moment during the gather phase where the technology answer becomes so obvious that further analysis becomes unnecessary. For example, the gatherer determines that the company already has the technology in place that it needs, but staff members are not using it or have reverted back to old methods. Clearly, additional training is required and management needs to motivate everyone to get on board.

When solutions are not so obvious, the first goal of the analyze phase is to sift through the information and identify problem areas. To do this, every technology area of the company should be organized into various categories. The typical construction company may include such categories as hardware/system, estimating, job cost/accounting, communications and company-wide software (such as Microsoft Word, Outlook, Excel, etc.).

Next, inefficiencies and problems need to be identified within each category and company-wide. Some problem areas will be easy to address while others will require more investigation. When nearly every office employee complains of frequent system crashes, for example, a hardware problem is immediately identified. Meanwhile, a first look at accounting and estimating practices finds that staff members are happy with their methods of recording and tracking job costs. A little more digging, and inefficiencies become apparent because employees are entering the same information numerous times in different systems.

The goal for this stage is to identify what solution or solutions the company should consider. Whether it includes a technology purchase or a complete technology overhaul, every cost must be identified and weighed to every benefit. Costs

include not just the dollar amount of purchasing technology, but also the people and time costs needed to get this technology up and running. Benefits also need to be clearly defined and based on fact. "Better billing" is not a reason to switch technology, but perhaps "billing that offers AIA, percentage of completion and custom-designed invoices" is a solution worthy of consideration.

3) PLAN. Based on all the information gathered, as well as careful analysis and prioritizing, a company can make a final decision regarding new technology. One individual or an entire team can review the short list of technology solutions. For each solution, discuss strengths and weaknesses as well as costs vs. benefits. One person must take the lead to sell the solutions to management, and once management is sold on the concept, it's time to gather, analyze and plan, yet again.

Double GAP is essentially the highly focused, drilled-down version of GAP. Here the company begins gathering information on the technology of choice from the Internet, trade journals, asso-

GAP-traps to avoid:

- believing new is always better;
- trusting everything you hear;
- not getting all users to buy in to the concept;
- underestimating time and resources; and
- thinking a project is 100 percent complete.

ciations, peers and trade shows. Analysis means building the short list of specific products and vendors and selecting the solutions that best fit the needs of the company. Planning involves working with a technology vendor, arranging training, setting goals and timetables for implementation.

Finally, implement the new technology. But, as is the case in nearly every other area of business, rarely will things go

precisely as planned. Companies always need to review, assess and modify. Most importantly, managers must make sure employees are accepting and enthusiastic about implementing new technology, or the whole GAP process will have been for nothing. This is more likely to happen when individuals come to understand how new technology will make their jobs easier and benefit the company as a whole.

The GAP method of selecting technology doesn't offer any miracles or quick fixes to technology dilemmas—just a new way of approaching a topic that many contractors find muddier than dirt.

Before beginning the method and considering any new technologies, keep one thing in mind: technology by itself does not solve problems. It should be used to leverage strengths a company already possesses. Chosen wisely, technology can and should seamlessly integrate with the business to increase productivity, efficiency and profits.

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