

WhatTheyThink?

Make Great Software Decisions

By Jennifer Matt

We collectively make a lot of poor software decisions. According to my very biased and unscientific research, we make way more mistakes in this area than we do with other business decisions. What is it about technology that causes a collective brain freeze when it comes to making good decisions?

I just finished the book *Decisive* by Chip and Dan Heath. You should read it. My friends and colleagues call this phenomenon “books on Jennie.” I read something, and then I talk incessantly about it for weeks, always the same enthusiastic story. This book is incredible; it will change the whole way you think. Here we go again. Believe me, this time it’s true; really, it is. I’m currently reading *Stillwell’s Experience in China, 1911-1945*, by Barbara Tuchman. Just be glad you don’t have to listen to that one (although it is, of course, fascinating).

Why do we make such stupid decisions when it comes to software? According to the Heath brothers we hit on all the common traps of decision-making. We arbitrarily narrow our choices further than necessary, we get afflicted by our confirmation bias, we get sucked in by short-term emotion, and we are overconfident about the future.

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For this article I’m going to focus on one thing you could do before your next major software decision to improve your batting average. This piece of advice helps confront the overconfidence we have about the future when involved in a sales process. Sales is about envisioning a better tomorrow. Unfortunately, sometimes the only one experiencing a better future is the sales person who cashes the commission check. I’m not against better tomorrows, I’m just for improving our predictive capabilities to include all potential outcomes. In *Decisive*, the Heath brothers refer to this as “bookending the future,” which I find brilliant. You run a scenario and predict crazy success. And then you run another one and predict

phenomenal failure. We’re going to talk about the failure scenario; the crazy success one is covered by the sales resources involved (the human manifestation of overconfidence).

The pre-mortem, a great name for this exercise. It is the future death of your project. Let me hit a little close to home to most readers. We’ll go over a pre-mortem for one of the most common software decisions that printers make today: investing in a print MIS/ERP system.

Print MIS/ERP Pre-Mortem

You realize you don’t have a clue what your actual costs are on a job-by-job basis. How can you continue to run your business without this key data? You decide it’s time to toss the color-coded folders, scheduling white board, and paper job tickets; and you buy a print MIS/ERP. You assign someone in prepress to do the research because they are on computers a lot. They start by calling all the leading vendors in the space and line up sales demonstrations. The individual starts tracking all the features in what becomes a gigantic spreadsheet which, when you print it – the

monster spreads across thirty pages; why is printing out of Excel such a pain in the ass?

You buy the product that wins the feature race, and you negotiate hard on the price. How can they charge so much for something I can't even see – it's just code that we're going to download right? They reduce the services price and the number of hours for training; they make promises about being live in a few weeks. And you're confident that you'll be looking at data this quarter that will actually help you make better decisions about where to focus your money and labor. You feel good. You're moving forward. You're done.

Its six months later, and the system isn't even close to operational. Nobody seems to be in charge. The vendor says you have no more paid-for services left. Yet you have absolutely nothing to show for the last six months. When you ask your employees what they know about the system, they are all collectively confused about why we would waste our precious time working on it at all. They are busy with real customer problems and revenue-generating activities; you find it hard to argue with that one. You ask a few people what they think is the purpose behind the software. They stare blankly at you and say, "To watch over us and assess how you can replace us with software or find how we should be working harder."

You spent five figures, distracted your team and you have no idea what to do next. The whole topic makes everyone cringe. You almost want to forget you even made the decision – then six months later the annual maintenance bill shows up, and you're pleasantly reminded all over again.

There's the pre-mortem for buying a print MIS system. Why tell this painful story before you buy a print MIS? I'm not trying to talk you out of it; I'm trying to talk you into doing it right. You predict disaster so you can pick it apart and prevent it from happening. This scenario is more likely to happen than the happy story told during the sales process. The incredible learning in telling this story is that you (yes, you) have the power to prevent this story from happening. I hate to break it to you, but 90% of the issues in this story are NOT

about the vendor. I'm not saying they are perfect; I'm just saying that most of this story is about you and your approach to this decision.

Here are the top mistakes and how to proactively plan to prevent them from happening.

1. You went shopping before you defined, documented, and communicated a business strategy. The software is not your strategy.
2. You did nothing on the internal marketing front – your people don't know why you're doing this, so they imagine the worst (because if you're not telling them, it must be so bad that you don't want them to know). They assume this is about replacing them or watching over their shoulders because you don't trust them. They can and will (consciously and subconsciously) kill the project by slowing it down so much that it eventually gets forgotten. This is a much more expensive way for a project to die.
3. You assigned the project to the wrong person. Technical people are part of the project, but they aren't necessarily the best leaders of the project. A print MIS system is about overall operations; and its successful implementation will touch every single part of your company. Pick someone who interacts, leads, and understands all areas of your company. It would help if the leader was also the evangelist – the person who will apply passion to overcome the obstacles, the resistance to change, and the mishaps that will happen along the way.
4. You didn't give one thought to what has to happen post-purchase. The execution is more important than the purchase. You have to have a plan which includes a budget, resources, and meaningful metrics to keep you on target. The vendor's services are critical to the execution phase of the project. You want to be ready to make every hour count, which means you have to have the people ready. And you need to share your business strategy with the vendor so that implementation can be prioritized based on what's important to you and your business.
5. You have to stay involved; you can't simply sign the check and then move on. An ERP/Print MIS system

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is a fundamental change that requires leadership from the very top.

6. Your team has to adopt this technology, not just get trained on it, but adopt it and quickly surpass the knowledge of the people from the vendor that are training you. This takes proactive learning rather than waiting to be spoon fed the information. The technology is doing a job for you, tracking labor and materials during your custom manufacturing process. This job is better done by software than people; see the software as a part of your team.

I think the pre-mortem of a project is so brilliant. If you participate with your team in this exercise, how focused will they be to ensure that none of these things happen? If you want to learn more about making great software decisions, look for our new book, Make Great Software Decisions, A Guide for Printers at www.EDSf.org.

About Jennifer Matt

Jennifer Matt is the managing editor of WhatTheyThink's The Web and Print blog. Jennifer is also currently an independent consultant focusing on the intricacies of print enabled eCommerce (web to print). She has spent the last 16 years working exclusively on web to print technology solutions, starting with a joint venture between Adobe and Kinko's in the early 90's and most recently as the President of NowDocs.

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