WhatTheyThink?

A Real Commitment to Change

By Jennifer Matt

Almost every company my team interacts with starts the conversation with a story about how they failed in the past, many of them multiple times on technology projects. The story goes something like this, we chose a technology, we wrote a big check to the vendor, and we hired the technology company to implement. It stalled, it failed, and it lost traction. We got bitter. We fired the technology partner. We started over and did the same thing again or we simply don't do those projects anymore because we're not willing to take the risk. This is a global phenomenon. I presented last week in China and Japan and after each talk several printers came up and said "we've done that multiple times."

We engage with people who often have what I call very recent technology wounds, not completely healed and very easy to re-open and re-infect. Why do people keep repeating the same mistakes over and over? I think the number one reason for repeating mistakes is the fact that we never have open and honest post-mortems after projects fail. Because you have the option to blame the technology and the technology provider, that's the safest road to take. Blame the vendor, fire them, rinse and repeat. Rarely does anyone inside the company take the time to look at their role in the failure. I'm not saying technology companies aren't part of the issue, I'm saying that everyone plays their part in the failure. You have much more control over your resources and your approach to projects than the vendor – focus on what you can control in order to set yourself up for success. Failure is expensive; make sure you cash in all the learning possible from it.

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Before you embark on the next episode of "rinse and repeat," call for a serious post-mortem on the last project that failed. This is not a listing of everything the vendor did; they are gone, who cares? Get in a room and get everyone to walk through what went right and what went wrong. This is harder than you think and nearly impossible in certain company cultures. Here's a brilliant presentation about how to use the Five Why's methodology in post-mortems. Without an honest and thorough post mortem on why projects have failed in the past, you'll be destined to keep repeating them.

Technology itself very rarely causes project failure. I've seen similar companies in the same market take the exact same software from the exact same vendor. One company is phenomenally successful the other a total failure. Implementation – the process of deploying the software for your business is where most projects fail. There is always great excitement on the purchase of technology. Nobody's very excited about the implementation, and it's always longer and more expensive than the sales pitch said it would be!

Successful implementation is about change management and focusing on what's important. When you look at the big picture of a Print MIS implementation, for example, the critical success factors are embedded in statements like: "Now we can understand our profitability on a job-by-job basis." What's important is always about business objectives and return on investment (ROI). It is never about the technology itself. The issue is that many of the projects are delegated to technology resources and those technology resources are given enough latitude to

decided what's important. Technology folks like to focus on technology and suddenly the project's focus is all about the technology and has little to do with the business objectives or return on investment. You might get perfectly implemented software that provides absolutely zero value to the business.

Success is rarely about which technology you pick, you can be successful with several technologies. Success is about how committed you are to change. Are you willing to make the investment? Are you willing to lead your company and keep them focused on what's important? You can't delegate the leadership, you can delegate the execution but you can't simply leave them alone for six months and assume your vision will come out the other end. You have to be engaged.

A commitment to change requires risk. I've had more than a few people say to me, "I'm betting my career on choosing your team to help us make this change." That communicates the willingness to risk and the willingness to evoke a shared commitment. Nobody wants to work on a failed project. Nobody wants to keep repeating failures, but until you accept a shared responsibility for the failure, you will bring your part of the failure to each and every new vendor you bring to the table.

Technology is easy to buy. The implementation of technology is a complicated dance between change management and inspiring people to invest their time now for optimization later. Initially technology always slows you down; eventually technology implemented correctly will allow you to scale in a way that isn't possible with labor alone.

Real adaptation takes time and effort and most importantly a real commitment. I love when customers ask for our commitment because when they do, I know they are already committed to the project. We are halfway to success at that point. Everyone knows we need to change, evolve and adapt, especially in these times of phenomenal change in the print industry and the overall communication transition from paper to screen. A real commitment to change requires a level of risk that most people aren't comfortable with; and without real commitment, real change rarely happens.

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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