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Market Intelligence for Printing and Publishing

The Manifestations of Fear in Print Software Implementations

Software implementations evoke fear in the minds of your employees—these fears are manifested in a variety of ways. You should be looking for fear, not reacting to the symptoms of fear that cause all kinds of issues with print software implementations.

By Jennifer Matt

There is an underlying root cause behind most of the challenges of implementing new print software in your business. It isn't the vendor, it isn't the software's lack of features, and it isn't the software sales representative's outlandish overselling. It is fear.

Software doesn't bite. What are we so afraid of?

It's complicated and it's different for different people.

This root cause is both powerful and hard to detect because the other unfortunate characteristic is that most people aren't even conscious of their fear. In very rare cases I've had people say to me, "This whole project makes me uncomfortable, I'm afraid of looking stupid. I've been in the print industry my whole career, I'm used to being an expert at work." Does that just sum it all up? You have people working for you that have been working in the industry for years—they've "seen it all," yet you're asking them to learn a brand new tool that feels foreign, has a high learning curve, and makes them feel like a beginner. Fear is real. Fear can take your Print MIS implementation down. Fear can kill off any dreams of successful adoption of web-to-print by your sales team.

Fear hides in some pretty clever ways during a print software implementation. The easiest way to hide your fear is to focus all your attention on why the software won't work in your business. When you see your team working double time finding every possible weakness in a software package or every possible use case that won't work, understand that you are dealing with fear. This is a classic manifestation of fear. "I don't want to do this; I'm going to make sure there are rational reasons to make it not work so I don't have to face my fear." The problem with this manifestation of fear is that it is really effective at derailing the implementation. Because management doesn't see the root cause, they start to believe that a software package has to "perfectly fit" their business in every way before it can be successfully implemented. Do you know how many perfect software packages there are in the print industry? Zero. There's never been one, there never will be one. Software is not perfect. No software package will ever be perfect for your business. You must be flexible in your approach to optimizing software in your business.

When management believes all these issues are "showstoppers" then they throw out the print software package and go shopping for a new one. Guess what happens with the new software package? The fear (root cause) isn't gone; it just got some time off while you were out shopping. Bring the next software package in and we have round two. Be careful; fear is a highly trained heavyweight fighter—it can go 10 to 15 rounds.

2 • The Manifestations of Fear in Print Software Implementations

Another manifestation of fear is stalling. The stalling tactic is based on the reasonable proposition that if this thing continues long enough, the business will eventually just give up on it. This tactic is maddening because time is money (especially when you're getting billed hourly for professional services or consultants). The stalling tactic is the easiest thing to do because people are busy and everyday they prioritize what they focus on. There are plenty of other justifiable priorities that can use up all your focus while you ignore the print software implementation. We have customers to serve (this is a very common excuse for not answering the implementation team's questions or missing deadlines or only half completing tasks that are required for implementation). The stalling tactic has another added advantage: as an internal employee, you always have the option to throw the vendor/consultant under the bus as an excuse. They aren't in all the meetings; you can easily make it look like it's their fault.

The final manifestation of fear I want to cover is harder to explain. It's a fear of systematizing what I do everyday rather than just letting me do it the way I've been doing it for years (spreadsheets, emails, PDFs, etc.). This fear is deep-rooted. This fear is what keeps manual workflows—e.g. secret estimating worksheets, secret scheduling logs, secret three-part NCR order forms for paper, etc.—alive and kicking outside the system. The thinking in your employees' minds is: this software can't replace my strategic thinking. I'm not going to take the time to learn this system and then put all my intellectual know-how into making it easy for anyone to do my job. Why would I do that? That's insane. I need to be the only one that can do this so that I have job security.

When you read that last paragraph you have to understand why someone might think that way, then you have to know that it's going to result in the exact opposite outcome. If they refuse to let software help them to be more efficient, they will be out of a job. If they refuse to systemize what they do so others can do it, you will not be able to scale profitably. Hiring more people as a business scaling technique doesn't work anymore. You have to be more efficient and software is the most powerful efficiency tool we have. The three manifestations of fear often combine themselves together and create a perfect storm of resistance. You will have an employee insisting that estimating wide-format jobs will never be possible in the new Print MIS, while they cling to their spreadsheets, and ignore the requests by the implementation team to put the costs in for the papers, finishing, and wide-format devices.

Fear is powerful, fear is elusive, fear is involved in almost every single print software implementation project. Learn how to recognize it. Understand the perspective of your employees, then deal with fear directly. Don't get distracted by the symptoms ("This isn't perfect software, I'm too busy for this implementation, and my spreadsheet works better")! Listen, be respectful, and then make it clear to your entire team: the future of the business depends on a single trusted system of record that runs the business. Not many hidden systems of record, but a single one that has all the data about the business in it. Then every employee can go on vacation, take a family leave day off, and the business still runs. You can grow profitably and without chaos. Fear is always hiding; make sure you look for it, and don't be fooled by its symptoms.

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