The Secret to Optimizing Your Software Solutions

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Most organizations realize the due diligence needed to ensure a high return on investment when implementing software solutions. Activities such as: identifying current and future business requirements, documenting business processes, selecting and configuring a software system to meet your business requirements and training your people to efficiently execute using the new system. There is no doubt that these steps are critical in selecting and implementing software solutions, but what about **after** the implementation? What are you doing to ensure that your software solution continues to align with your business, post implementation? Unfortunately, all too often, that question is left unanswered. The real secret to having truly effective software solutions is realizing your implementation project never really ends!

In a fast paced, ever changing world, businesses are in a continuous state of change, whether that change is focused on capturing additional market share, improving customer relations, adjusting to new regulations or just simply attempting to operate in a more efficient manner. For companies to keep pace and stay competitive, they are constantly changing and adapting their businesses processes and practices, but during this practice, organizations are regrettably losing sight of how these changes are affecting their software solutions. The result is a jumbled and disjointed system of workarounds and off-line processes/databases, all which can impact your software efficiency and the flow of business critical information. How your company addresses these potential pitfalls is critical to ensuring your software solutions are optimized and that you're operating at peak efficiencies.

Companies that rely on their software solutions to give them a competitive advantage understand that the software solution, in and of itself, does not provide a competitive advantage. It's the consistent and continual investment in aligning the solution with their business processes and deploying the latest functionality that their software platform provides. Some measures companies are taking to accomplish this are:

- **Identifying a product manager** – The product manager may be one person or a team of people, depending upon the size and complexity of the business. Nonetheless, the product manager is the

key to ongoing system optimization. Product managers are uniquely positioned to have a solid understanding of business processes and how the software solution should perform within those processes. The product manager's main responsibilities are to keep a pulse on: changes in processes and business practices, growth strategies, employee turnover and any other changes that may cause misalignment between business and the designated software solution. Once areas of misalignment are identified, the product manager will utilize their knowledge of the software solution and, where needed, work with the software provider to identify solutions and lead company initiatives that promote realignment of business practices with the software solution. For some companies this may be a part time role, and for others it could be a full time position. The key is to devote the amount of time and resources appropriate for your business to ensure you are optimizing your software solutions and getting the full benefit of your investment.

- **Conducting an annual system review** – An annual system review is typically performed by your software vendor and your product manager. The review serves as a routine checkup of the overall health of your software solutions. The review is meant to supplement and enhance the work that the product manager has already done. The software provider will identify any areas for improved system alignment and highlight any new functionality that may benefit the business. Similar to today's business models, a software solution is also in a constant state of change, and therefore, it is critical to gain a solid understanding of any recent system enhancements or changes and how they may be utilized in your operation. The output of the annual system review should be an in-depth system utilization plan comprised of recommendations such as: updated system configuration, additional education for employees, management reports and any other initiatives or action items that your product manager can prioritize and deploy.

- **Developing a relationship with your software provider** – Developing an open relationship with your software provider, will aid in aligning the organizations to create an informed and shared vision for the software solution. This will ensure the product continues to support your strategic

objectives and growth plans. A good start to developing this relationship is with an annual system review, but it's only the start. Another way to engage is to attend their annual user's conference. The user's conference provides a venue where you can learn more about your provider, their people, and most importantly, the rest of the install base. Networking with other companies can be invaluable in discussing and learning innovative ways to better utilize your software solution. This dialogue also helps make sure your business requirements are effectively communicated and that they are being considered in the system development priorities and on the future product roadmap. You should look to engage your software provider in any discussions pertaining to your strategic objectives. Topics such as: a new line of business, a new geography, customer satisfaction initiatives, regulatory requirements and competitive requirements. Conversely, through these discussions, you should be working to gain a clear understanding of your software provider's product roadmap and company initiatives.

- **Implementation plan** – Now that you have taken all the right steps by identifying a product manager, conducting an annual system review and are actively engaging with your software provider…now what? With all of this valuable information at your fingertips you now need to develop a system improvement strategy. The challenge with this can be prioritizing the tactical and strategic initiatives around your current resource and budget constraints - do not try to tackle all system improvement projects at once. Instead, focus on those that provide the most return on investment and diligently work your way through the projects continually assessing and reevaluating your list. Ultimately your system improvement strategy becomes an ever-changing, prioritized list of projects that continuously serve to better align your business and software solution for optimum efficiency and effectiveness.

It's no secret how critical it is to invest in the selection and implementation of the right software solution for your business, but what surprises many is that it is even more important to invest in the continual alignment of the software solution with your business. By utilizing these steps you will begin to understand that a truly

successful software system implementation never really ends. So, don't be left looking back and wondering what happened. Take the initiative and position your software solution to be the competitive advantage you need to grow your business.

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