

# **When Technology Fizzles: Look to the Human Factor**

***If you build it, will they come?***

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"Build it and they will come." That maxim may work for baseball parks, but many healthcare organizations have learned the hard way that you can lead your people to software but you cannot always make them log on. For every software program that is enthusiastically and speedily adopted, just as many meet with reluctance, indifference, or even outright hostility. They may not gather dust, but they don't always receive the speedy, enthusiastic adoption hoped for. It's not that they don't have potential, but because they were carelessly introduced.

A lot was written about user resistance in the 1990s (much of it, who knows why, in England and Australia), at a time when most people were still struggling to master basic email and word processing, and when the programs themselves still had enough glitches to frustrate the most determined early adopter. No wonder so many university web sites from that era posted at least one masters' thesis on the obstacles to IT implementation.

These days, basic systems have evolved to the point where, mercifully, they work most of the time, and just about every large organization on the planet has managed to adopt basic computer functions. Of course many senior managers still rely on their assistants to filter and print their messages for them, and the idea of "best practices" is still foreign to many IT users, but at least documents are getting saved and messages sent. For most organizations, this appears to suffice.

Yet new software comes to market every year, much of it revolutionary, and with each innovation the same question arises: How do you get people to embrace the change?

In 2004, organizations will spend well over \$100 billion on new software and upgrades for purposes as diverse as billing, data storage, workflow mapping, course management, charitable donor processing, real estate estimating, patient information, and on and on. Most buying decisions will be made by IT staffers in consultation with senior managers. Average workers won't know what hit them until they get the memo. The usual grumbling will erupt, followed by some cursory training that half the staff will be too busy to digest, and the new program will either worm its way into the organization's culture or it won't. None of this would really matter if budgets were not so tight and software so expensive.

The State of California made headlines in 2002 for a \$95 million-dollar deal with Oracle for database software that did not live up to expectations, to say the least. While the media focused mostly on possible contracting improprieties, *Computerworld* magazine got to the heart of the matter when it reported in April of that year that: "No state departments have taken advantage of the new agreement, and the reality will be that by June the state will have spent \$17 million with nothing to show for it."<sup>1</sup>

California's IT chief lost his job over the flap, yet, legalities aside, the low adoption rate was certainly not that poor devil's fault. Technical professionals are experts in technology, not employee motivation. He may have attended the meetings, he may even have chosen the software, but what actually causes people to reject, or at least resist, the technology offered them, is not a failure of the product or its overseers but rather a failure of leadership to address the human side of the equation.

The road to a successful launch must begin at the first inkling that some new software

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.computerworld.com/databasetopics/data/story/0,10801,70300,00.html>

might be a good investment. That's the time to start:

1. **Include all potential users in the decision making.** Ask them what features they need and want. Automated surveys make this easy, no matter how large your group. Invite key influencers to product demos, and follow up with a straw poll on what they thought. Make sure they know that their opinions count and that what they want matters. This is the key to buy-in.
2. **Address user needs and preferences.** If survey results demonstrate, as one recent client survey by my company did, that half the users are Apple loyalists while the other half use PCs, then you must, if you truly want broad adoption, forego any product that is not cross-platform compatible. New products enter the market all the time; none are perfect, but you can improve results by listening to your users and adhering to the common ground at least on their top priorities.
3. **Inform everyone about the final choice and what it means.** People want to know what they are getting into and why they should bother. Will the innovation make their work easier, their results better, or their strategic position stronger? Will it be easy to use? Will training and support be adequate? What are the downsides as well as the up? Be specific. If you stand behind the investment, you should be ready to act as cheerleader.
4. **Include "best practices" in the training.** Especially with interactive software for collaboration or learning, there is more to mastering the program than knowing what keys to press. Complaints about IT often come because the other guy got sloppy or didn't follow protocol. An orientation, followed by periodic reminders, can prevent grief. For example, establishing a protocol for email subject-lines, and sticking to it, will make everyone's day easier.

Nowhere are these steps more important than with the new systems for knowledge management and virtual collaboration. For large-scale investments like these, a few smart organizations have hired their own cultural anthropologist or other "people person" to guide the group through the implementation process and keep the human factor on the table. The goal is not just to improve usage but to shepherd a cultural transformation in which the software serves as the platform for a higher level of team work, greater efficiency, lower costs, additional output, and an eventual boost to the bottom line.

Whatever the software, if it has no strategic importance, it's not worth the silicon it was built on. If it does have true value, then surely it deserves a proper introduction. After all, if you really want to be in the game, first you've got to get the players onto the field, warmed up and eager to play.

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**Gail Terry Grimes** is CEO of the consulting and training firm FutureU, on the web at [www.FutureU.com](http://www.FutureU.com). From her perspective, information technology is a worthwhile investment only to the extent that it builds bridges among people.