

Successful software implementation

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Software implementations have a high failure rate. It is not so much that the software is never installed but the frequency with which projects run over budget, over time and fail to deliver the benefits promised. It cannot be stressed too strongly that the best way to reduce the risk of failure is to understand exactly what you want to achieve at the outset and plan every step of the way.

Before proceeding, identify where in the process you are by answering the following:

- Which part of your business will the software support?
- What do you want it to do?
- What will you do better when the system is in place?
- What are the financial and/or other benefits you anticipate?
- Who is going to use the software?
- Have the users been involved in the discussions?
- What is wrong with the systems you are currently using?
- Who is going to be responsible for driving the implementation?
- Are you prepared to redefine your business processes to match a standard software offering or are you planning to have lots of (potentially expensive) bespoke work done?
- Are you prepared for the cost and upheaval of changing your business processes?

If you answered 'no', or 'I don't know' to any of these questions, you are probably not ready to start selecting software.

Which part of your business will the software support?

Is it for the management surveyors, the facilities managers, or the accountants? These groups will have very different requirements, and so will subsets within the groups – the functionality needed to support surveyors involved in transactions is different from that required for estate management or valuation. Is the system to stand alone or integrate with other systems, e.g. a company-wide financial accounting system or a facilities management help desk?

What do you want it to do?

Having decided which area of the business you wish to support, what do you actually want the system to do? Are you looking for a property 'terrier', i.e. a database for storing and manipulating ownership, lease and property details? Do you want a system that is strong in property accounting – rent, rates and service charge management? It is absolutely essential to be clear about the key aspects of functionality you are looking for. Software systems tend to have a couple of areas of strength and be merely adequate, or non-functional in other areas. Knowing the areas that are most important to you can save a lot of time in wasted demonstrations.



What will you do better when the system is in place?

Answering this question is vital, both in formulating a business case for the investment required and also for judging the success or failure of the project. According to the Institute of Management, 78% of IT projects fail to deliver the anticipated benefits at the expected cost. Generally this is because expectations are either too vague, unrealistic or not shared by the users. You need to understand exactly what you expect to do better when the project is completed and why this will benefit your business. This might include:

- significantly reducing the time to produce end of year service charge accounts from the current industry average of about 20 weeks;
- paying bills on time, (and only paying once!) to benefit from discounts;
- reduction in number of personnel required to process accounts; and
- improved response time to tenant queries or maintenance, resulting in better client/tenant relationships.

What are the financial and/or other benefits you anticipate?

It is unlikely that the installation of new systems will translate directly into improved turnover or profit in the short term, but you need to consider what longer-term benefits, both financial and 'soft' you can expect. For example, would the introduction of a new client relationship management (CRM) tool improve client retention and thus increase margins? On the non-financial side, is there a labour intensive system of photocopying documents that could be made much simpler with a system of scanning all incoming items?

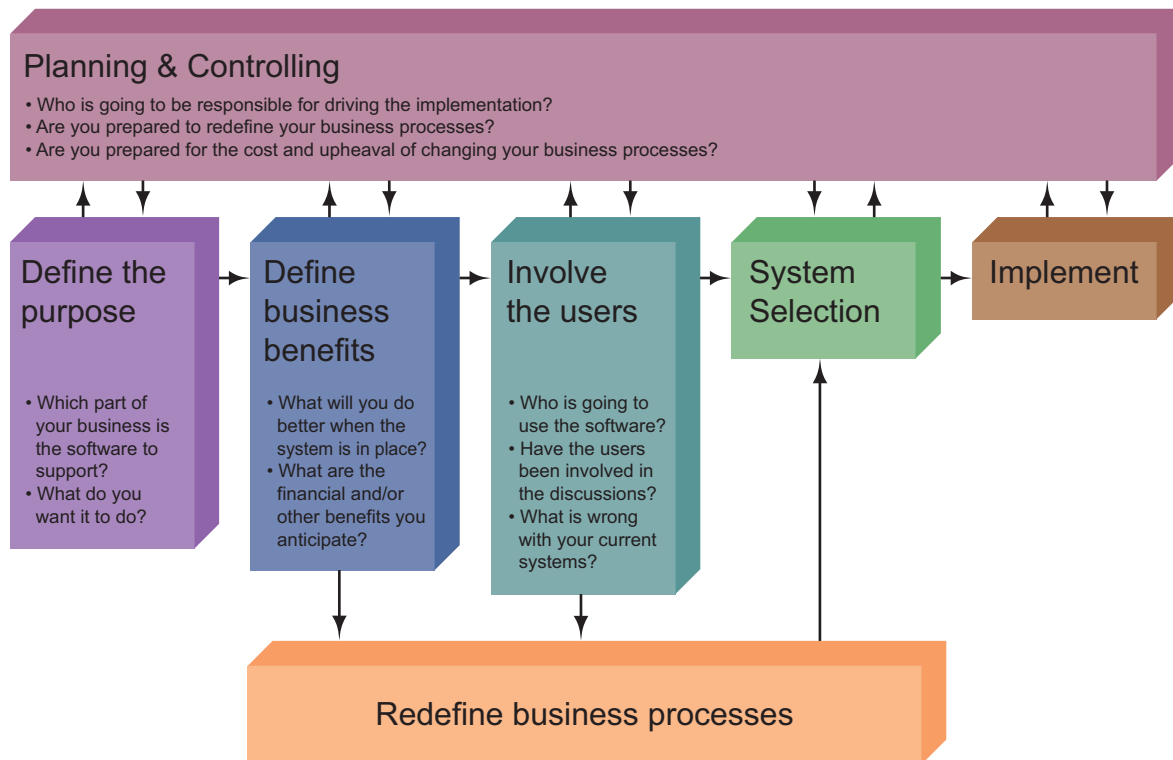
Who is going to use the software?

Is this for everyone or just a department? Is it to run and manage the business on a day-to-day basis or to provide management information for strategic planning? Is it for an international portfolio – some systems are localised for a variety of countries, others may need to be specifically adapted for your requirements. Do all users need to be able to add information or can you limit cost by only having a limited number of 'write' licences with the majority of users just able to gather information with a 'read-only' access. Is remote access necessary and, if so, should it be true web-enabled or Citrix?

Have the users been involved in the discussions?

Even if users complain regularly about the existing system, this does not mean that it will be easy to persuade them to adopt a new one. Involving users in the planning stage is may well

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reduce the likelihood of fundamental business processes being overlooked and will tend to make the users more receptive to change. During the project, it is important to continue to communicate with, and involve, the users. Do not conduct a brief user session, disappear into a black hole and return in six months with a new system that may not reflect their needs.

What is wrong with the systems you are currently using?

Could you achieve the benefits you are looking for by improving how you use your current system? A significant cause of apparent underperformance in property systems is the lack of user knowledge. A review of the capabilities of your system and some additional staff training might be a more cost-effective way of improving performance. Be certain that you are looking for functionality that is not available in your current system before rushing to change it!

Who is going to be responsible for driving the implementation?

You need to have someone in charge of this. That person must have enough authority to actually get things done and be flexible enough to deal with the inevitable crises that will occur. Unless you have high level focus on the project, organise

it like a military campaign and understand at the outset exactly what you want to achieve. It will take longer than you think, and cost more.

Are you prepared to redefine your business processes to match a standard software or are you planning to have bespoke work done?

Many purchasers of software come unstuck when they expect the system to mirror current business processes. Software systems are built to handle a range of processes in standard ways. It is more cost effective to select the system that most closely reflects your current processes but then use this opportunity to streamline your current processes to match the selected software. Avoid bespoke systems – they are a headache and can cause all sorts of problems in the future.

Are you prepared for the cost and upheaval of changing your business processes?

Implementing a new system is an ideal time to review your business processes. Trying to change everything is not only difficult but probably not worth the effort. Instead, identify the key processes that have the greatest impact on the business, consider how they could be carried out more efficiently and select the right system to support them.

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Have you thought about training the users?

Many organisations spend tens of thousands of pounds on software, then send a couple of key users on a two day training course and expect that to be enough. All users need to have an overview of the whole system and to be thoroughly trained in the parts of it that are relevant to their own tasks. Frequently, as time passes and original trained users leave, companies have no one left who has been properly trained to use a system and believe, as a result, that the system is not capable of delivering what is required. At this point, a senior member of staff sees a

demonstration of another system and believes it to be much better, when in fact, with proper training, the same result could be achieved with the current system. Neglect of training is an extremely expensive short-cut in the long run.

If considering these questions has left you feeling rather daunted, do not despair! Introducing a new system will take time, patience and money and you should not underestimate how much of all them, but if you can significantly improve the time and cost taken to deliver the processes which give you your competitive edge then the pain of installing a new system should be worth it.