

You Just Bought The Wrong Product!! (The Insider's Secret Guide to Buying the RIGHT Technology)

Congratulations, your company just wasted tens of thousands of dollars on a new CAD / CAM / PDM / ERP / PLM / RPM / XXX system. It's not going to give you anywhere near the productivity gains that the salespeople said that it would. Before you panic, the reason that I know this is that software itself never makes a difference in any organization. Through my ten year stint in the CAED industry selling and implementing a variety of solutions and products, I've picked up quite a few secrets that can mean the difference between client success and throwing money away. My hopes are that this article will help demystify some of the steps that you need to take in order to identify – and succeed with – a new technology.

The first thing to understand is that software doesn't make money, people make money. Technology of any kind is merely a tool. And like power (or "The Force"), it can be used for good or evil. Now I'm not talking about the destruction of the world, but I am saying that a perfectly good technology can actually drain productivity from an organization. It is not the technology in and of itself that solves problems, it's all in how appropriate the technology is, how it is implemented, and how you change to suit the technology. You are going to have to adopt a new way of working that takes the best aspects of how you work now, and applies the most appropriate tools in the new technology to create a new process.

I think that Tom Collins put it best in his book *Good To Great*, when he referred to these tools as "technology accelerators" because they accelerate good processes. I have worked with companies that embraced the new tools, understood the benefits and built new processes around the tools, reaping huge benefits. I've also seen people use cutting edge technology to simply automate their 45-year old processes and complain to no end that it's slower than doing it by hand. The truth about technology is that it is just a tool. And like a chainsaw is just a tool, you're either going to get a lot of firewood really fast, or you're going to lose a limb.

Any technology tool is designed a specific way to work a specific way. When evaluating tools, you need to understand what the programmers expect you to do with this tool and how it is designed to work. If a tool is not designed to address your scenario, you might want to look for a different tool. For example, if you design piping layouts, you may find this really cool new technology that automatically designs entire systems and generates full cut lists. But if the product is designed for furniture makers to do lumber cut lists, then it's probably going to be a bit of a bastard fit for you to get it to address your specific needs.

The flip side is that if you wait to find a product that was written specifically for your company, you're going to be waiting quite a while, and paying quite a lot if you do get lucky enough to find it. The key is to find technology that addresses your needs, but still provides flexibility. You don't want to have to write the program yourself (or spend years customizing), but at the same time, you don't want to completely change the way that you do things. After all, there are many key pieces of intelligence that your company has developed over the past umpteen years. Those are the competitive advantages that you don't want to lose. There has to be a conglomeration, a melding of the tools, your process and the new technology.

The most critical point is that during the evaluation phase is when you need to develop the new vision of how your company will operate. You need the experts (and that demo jock giving you the demo should be one of the best they have) to show you what your life will look like with this product. They will try to show you a canned demo of features, features, features. "Look what we can do!!" Great, but that's not what you need to see. They expect you to deduce that since they can do all this cool stuff, that they must be able to handle your problems. But the devil is in the application of their technology to your specific issues. Most software products today are customizable through options and settings, tailoring interfaces, or through programming using an Application Programming Interface (API). Many software vendors will say "Sure we can do that" if a program or script can be written, that when combined with your purchase, will net the desired result. Most prospects in this position don't realize they're signing up for custom programming time. If it's customizable, let them customize it to show you something close to what you need.

The vendor is going to fight you on the custom demo, though. Remember that the vendor wants to get out of there as quickly as possible. You can't blame them, the longer they stay, the more the cost of sale goes up and the less they make. You can't fault them for wanting to be profitable. So do them a favor, let them know up front, how you do things now and let them know that you want to see what your new process is going to look like with their product installed. Vendors that understand the concept of combining their tool with your process will be happy to provide you with a custom demo.

Some vendors may require you to go through an As-Is Business Process Analysis (not usually free) where one of their experts comes in and documents how you do things. DO IT! Yes, this document will help them sell to you, but if done properly, it also helps you make sure that you are getting the right solution. Most importantly, it's the first step in the implementation, so you're going to have to do it anyway. Also realize that this document will help you realize if this product, vendor or service provider is not a good fit. Let them know that if they do a lousy job here, you have no intentions of hiring or buying from them. If they do a good job and the tool just isn't right, you already have the background work done and you can use the document with another vendor. Beware though, some (ok, most) vendors will slant the document to make their solution look ideal, and some unscrupulous ones might even omit details that their competitors do better than them.

But this exploration process is important, and it is the process itself that is important. Typically, the process will involve some questionnaires and some interviews and roundtable discussions (if it's just questionnaires and forms, find another vendor!). Pay attention to what is brought up in these interviews and sessions, and request that the analysts give you the full picture, not just the case for their ROI. Quite often, these research steps alone help to identify and eliminate many bottlenecks, waste steps, and issues that management were not even aware of just by helping people to be open and honest and by listening. Pay attention to the questions that the interviewers ask, and continue to think about them after the interview. Many times, something important will come to you later, and many an unmentioned issue or need arises during this stage.

If your reseller or vendor doesn't offer this service, find someone that does. Nobody would dream of walking into a car showroom and saying, "Hey, I don't know what I want, but I got money and I want to buy a car" any more than they would dream of diving into a shark tank with dead fish glued all over them. Without this understanding of what you are doing now, and where you want to be, you have no idea of what you want to buy, and you're just waving money out the window saying "anyone want to convince me?" Internal specifications are nice, but with only internal views, you're just going to ask for something exactly like you have, only 10% more powerful. Someone that rides a bicycle to work every day will only ask for a more powerful bicycle unless they already understand what a car is, how it works, and how cool that satellite radio truly is.

It is crucial to get the outside perspective, even if it is slightly slanted, or get a neutral 3rd party analyst if you want no slant. Business Process Analysis should not cost you more than \$5,000 -10,000 and shouldn't take more than 3-5 days. Compare this to buying the wrong \$70,000 system and spending two years before you realize you bought the wrong thing. Remember, you just need enough of an overview to be an intelligent consumer, you're not looking for a full overhaul. These services are not just for the wealthy and the huge mega-corporations anymore. The lessons and techniques that made the Fortune 500, well, fortunate, are basic studies for any process analyst and it's time for everyone to benefit from these lessons.

Buying technology all boils down to trust. You need to find a service partner that you can trust to give you a good, honest assessment of where you are and where you want and need to be. Then, and only then, you can start looking for that express technology train to take you there. Make sure that you get the vendor to show you what your process is going to look like with their product, a "day in the life" demo. Most of all, make sure that you are comfortable with your vendor and/or reseller, because you're not buying a tool, you're buying a relationship. And as with any relationship, it can bring the birth of great things or it can leave you fighting over the car and the house. Happy hunting!

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Rating: ★★★★★

Reviews:



- ★★★★★ **Humor and Good Advice** September 08, 2005

Reviewed by 'Toolie'

Finally, an article that I can read from start to finish and not start skimming 3 sentences in. Its nice to read an article on MCADcafe that isn't just a vendor's press release with a bunch of techno-babble about their recent feature set. I think Paul's advice is great. In an earlier life with a previous employer, I spent the better part of a year trying to get 3D CAD and PDM implemented before leaving the company in exasperation. In the end, the users that were ready to adopt, adopted, and those that weren't, weren't forced to by management. I still keep in touch with folks there, and the situation hasn't changed. Paul hit this on the head in his article - it was good technology, but it wasn't implemented well (was lacking management support). I'm looking forward to more articles by Paul - if this one is any indication, its humorous, and GOOD, advice.

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