

Seven Remedies for Technology Headache No. 2001

One thing is certain in 2001: You'll have to make an important technology purchasing decision.

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for Office.com*

Nov. 15, 2000— Whether you run a one-person office or you're CEO of a Fortune 500 company, it's almost certain that you will make a key technology purchasing decision in the coming year.

Perhaps you'll outsource your Web hosting, install a new network or add a major software feature to your customer service. A wise decision can save your company money and make it more productive - maybe even create faster customer service. If you make the decision too hastily or base it on the wrong criteria, it means years of problems and wasted people resources. Worse, it chases away customers or drains hard-earned cash.

Business magazines are bursting at the seams with ads for business technologies. Most of them are from companies with Star Trek character names offering interchangeable tag lines such as "a fully integrated solution." Most promise either a unique solution (less likely each week), or the ability to do what a dozen other companies do, only better. Makes a tough decision even tougher.

But face it, you do need technology to run your business smarter, more productively, more efficiently. Today, it's management decision No. 1. You need to find new customers. You need to find out what those customers like and don't like so you can keep them coming back. When clients have a problem or question, you need the tools to resolve it. Software or hardware solutions can make these things happen - if you choose the right ones.

Companies with deep pockets often hire heavy-hitter consultants to narrow down their technology choices; these are typically staffed by freshly minted MBAs billed at several hundred bucks per hour. That's a good choice for a Fortune 500 that needs the specialized talent for a one-shot deal implementation.

If you're not in that category, chances are your budget is not so lavish. So, you must become the technology guru, making the hard calls alone.

Here are seven proven guidelines to separate the superb technology wheat from the me-too chaff:

Pinpoint the pain.

Is there a "pain point" in your organization that's costing you time or money? Is there a big leak where customers are falling out and going elsewhere? Are you falling behind your competitors because of dated technology? If this solution truly eases the pain or plugs up the leaks, then you need it. Skip the "nice to have" solutions.

Is the future bulletproof?

Will you have to go through all this again a year or two from now, or does this solution grow and evolve as your business does? Ask technology suppliers about upgrades, add-on options and future changes already being developed. Ask how much customer feedback goes into development decisions. If the company thinks of itself as a leader, its customers should be deciding which features and enhancements are necessary, not its marketing department.

Some killer-app strategies

Don't be a beta test!

Some suppliers offer deep discounts to try out products not fully tested. Don't get seduced. Check references. Does the company have a strong customer base and a positive track record? Do they have partnerships with quality companies?

Will this thing get along with everyone else?

Today, no system can act alone. Make sure what you're buying is compatible with other systems. Ask: Is this a proprietary product that takes an army of consultants to make it work with other applications, or is it a solution that easily interfaces with our existing hardware and software? The most desirable solutions use open standards that are accepted throughout the world, products that can easily communicate with other databases or software products.

Is it "user-simple" or "developer-complex"?

Techies get their jollies making things complex. Avoid such systems like the plague. Chose solutions with user-simple "drag-and-drop" capabilities, for example, not onerous, complex code-writing requirements. Check installation and customization times. Ensure end users recognize the interfaces.

They'll check your credit. You check theirs.

Is this supplier built to last? There are literally hundreds of B2B exchanges now; how many will be survivors in five years? So, check it out. Does this company command the financial resources to outlast the competition? While their killer application may be impressive, make sure the company you buy it from will be with you for years to come.

Now, let's talk service.

You've got people problems? Well, so do they! In today's tight labor market, some firms are hiring anyone off the street, while others boast long-tenured, highly qualified service staffs. This is a tough call, perhaps the toughest. But you've got to make it. Can this company's staff resolve your problems, whenever and wherever the problems occur?

Once you are satisfied that you have a handle on these seven issues, move onto other comparisons, such as depth of features, costs and return on investment. Then, get back to what makes your business grow - providing real value to your customers, secure in the knowledge you've made the best technology solution for them and you.

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