

# The First Step to a Successful Computer Project – Put Fashion in the Back Seat

*by Bonnie D. Huval*

To survive, your company needs a step-change improvement in its efficiency and productivity. Top management has decided upgrading the computer system is the ticket to that improvement--the company will scrimp elsewhere to fund it--and you are in charge of making it happen. The big boss says to bring in the latest and greatest.

Where should you start? By looking up reviews and ratings to find out which hardware and software are the best?

Sure, if you want an expensive failure. Maybe it will run, but it's likely to make everybody's lives miserable for years upon years instead of making the business run smoother.

Start by looking at the business. Determine what it needs to do--look hard, not just once over. Then look for the computer system best suited to helping accomplish it.

## **A Simple Example**

Many years ago, when DOS was new and CP/M was popular, my mother's master's thesis required retyping a zillion times. My father decided to buy one of those new-fangled desktop computers so she could write her dissertation with a word processor. So far, so good.

But my parents thought they could take a short cut. During our next visit, they told me about this plan, then said, "So, which computer should we buy?"

I refused to name any. I told them to visit computer stores and "test drive" word processing programs. At the time, the programs worked very differently. Some used key combinations to embed formatting commands. Others used special syntax to distinguish formatting from text. My mother is a touch typist and had unusual word processing needs, so those differences would matter. When they found the program she liked best, then they should ask what machines could run it and buy one of those. My parents were... let's just say they were not happy with me.

I wouldn't budge, so they went to computer stores in the big city.

My mother's specialty is medieval British literature. Modern English does not have some of the alphabetic characters the language used to have. The missing characters are represented now by striking one modern letter and overstriking at a half-width offset with another modern letter. Back then, none of the word processing programs could do that. WordPerfect could be modified appropriately. Only two combinations of computer and printer were available that could run it.

They bought one and it did exactly what my mother needed.

### **Even Big Companies Can Do It Wrong**

I have seen Fortune 500 companies make mistakes a lot like the one my parents escaped. The most common are:

- Putting in a computer system to simply do everything the same way it was done before, with the new computer system involved wherever possible.
- Getting a computer system that a sales agent says will do everything they need, but that does not really fit, and then forcing the business to fit computer system.

Either mistake is costly. The first costs money to put in the new computer system, but misses the opportunity to make workflow more effective. It happens too easily because people who understand the flow of work in a business rarely understand what a computer could and could not handle. My mother did not realize overstriking with an offset of half a width might be almost impossible for word processors when it was easy on her typewriter.

The second mistake is worse. After costing money to buy the new system, the business has to distort its procedures to suit the convenience of a software vendor (typically at the expense of effectiveness). Productivity can actually decline!

### **Doing It Right for Your Business**

You will not make these mistakes and others similar to them if you begin by getting a clear understanding of not just how your business is doing everything now, but what it really needs to do. Like my parents, you need to understand that thoroughly, not just at a surface level. Small details like the characters that are no longer part of English can be important.

Walk through what shop floor operators do to make your product, or what forklift drivers do to load your trucks, or what agents do to start a new insurance policy for a customer--whatever your business does. Find the bottlenecks. Walk through revised versions of your business procedures until the new workflow is the way you want it and you know exactly what you want a computer system to do in that workflow.

*Then*, and only then, it is time to look at the hardware and software available, because at last you know what you want it to do. You are no longer an easy mark for a polished sales pitch. Instead, you will look at what the available systems can do with an eye toward how well that suits the ideal new workflow. You might find, as my parents did, that you have a choice between the latest and greatest, or something older with a solid track record that can do the same job at half the cost. Also like my parents, you might find that nothing on the market is a perfect match, but something you can buy "off the shelf" can be readily tailored to fit well enough without the need for entirely custom software.

Be driven by what your company really needs, not by the latest fashion, and your project can be a great success!

**About the author:** Bonnie D. Huval has been a consultant since 1992, helping companies make more money with their automation and transaction systems. Successful projects include cutting time to ship product from two days to two hours, and cutting downtime for product introduction by 40%. To get such consulting help for your firm, go to <http://www.seneschal.biz> Her USA and UK business interests also include real estate, property management and a restaurant. Go to <http://www.makesureyougetpaid.com> for her materials to help small businesses be more successful. Copyright 2009. This article may be reprinted only in its entirety, with full attribution.

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