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Staffing Success Magazine (July–August 2009)

Software Buyer's Guide

Experts Offer Tips for Selecting the Right Technology for Your Business

By Jim McDermott

If you're looking to uncover additional value in today's volatile marketplace, you may be thinking of buying new, more powerful staffing software that can help you improve efficiency and cut costs.

The stakes are always high when you select new technology, because you're cementing, in practical terms, a five-year commitment to the product you choose. But the current economic uncertainty has considerably upped the ante: spending limited resources wisely has rarely been more critical. A further complication is the options available—enough to overwhelm even the most ardent technophile.

To help you make sense of this complexity and find the right technology for your business, *Staffing Success* interviewed software providers, staffing professionals whose companies that have successfully transitioned to new software, and a staffing software consultant. These experts offered seven tips for making the notoriously bumpy software-selection process run more smoothly.

1. Find a Senior-Level Champion

Who's going to lead your software-selection effort? Perhaps you're tempted to let the information technology staff handle it, but it's wiser to appoint as "champion" a senior leader who thoroughly understands your business.

Why? No matter how cutting-edge, software is ultimately useful only as an enabler of your business.

"If one of the owners can't do it, someone as senior as the chief operating officer or a sales exec should shepherd the project," advises Kate Post of Forrest Solutions in New York City, which purchased new software three years ago. "You might say, 'We can't lose business while we go through this,' but if your implementation doesn't go smoothly, your clients won't be happy."

2. Write It All Down

Your team is in place, and it's talking over the potential benefits of buying software. But there are risks too. For example, a mismatch between your business needs and the technology you choose could mean starting over with a different product. How do you avoid such a costly mistake? The surest way is to document your business processes and your unique business strengths (or differentiators) well before you talk with software suppliers.

Document Your Business Processes

Create a simple workflow for each process, such as "contact candidates" or "invoice clients", with a sentence or two describing what happens during each step. Down the road, you can use this snapshot to pinpoint where the technology you're evaluating would create efficiencies or add bottlenecks.

"Technology is great, but if you have to change a whole process to fit the technology you buy, and retrain everyone, that's a big undertaking," says Sara Moss of the Code Works Inc., a staffing software consulting firm in San Jose, CA. "Documenting your business processes may go faster than you think, and it will help you know exactly what you're getting into."

Identify Your Differentiators

You'll also need to make sure the technology you're evaluating won't interfere with what sets you apart from competitors. Look at your selling points and seek out technology that reinforces what you do best in the marketplace.

3. Draw Up a Wish List

With the prep work finished, it's time to ask what your business needs and to describe, in your own words, how software could help. This is your wish list of desired features. Maybe you want the world's simplest visual interface, or you want to automate routine tasks to the ultimate degree. Network with industry colleagues and visit supplier Web sites for more ideas, experts advise. And keep in mind that some features come with the territory. Whether your business involves executive recruiting or focuses on contract placements, you'll almost certainly want Web-based features that give your employees remote access to candidate records. The industry demands it, no matter the size of your company.

Other useful features are integrated e-mail, which lets you send e-mail blasts to entire candidate databases, and customer relationship management systems, which enable your sales and recruiting teams to share information.

As you make your wish list, keep in mind that you'll be using your new software for five to seven years. Post says, "What you need to create your business

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for five to seven years. Post says, "what you need to operate your business changes rapidly these days. Have a fairly clear vision of what your business will look like five years from now—not 10—and go with a company that will stay, if not ahead of the curve, then with the curve of where your business is going."

4. Cut Through the Clutter

It's time to evaluate suppliers, and there may be 100 companies that offer the sort of software you want. Talking with all of them obviously isn't practical. So how do you make a realistic short list? According to some industry experts, the fastest way is to hire a staffing software consultant. The American Staffing Association can provide you with names of consultants. Within a week, a skilled consultant can enable you to release a request for information. But be sure to weigh the advantage in time saved against the cost of the consultant's expertise.

Another effective method, experts advise, is to interview software companies at Staffing World[®], the ASA annual convention and expo. "At Staffing World, you can see the playing field, get a sense of what the options are, and go through as many demos as you can," says Robin Mee. Her company, Mee Derby & Co. in Bethesda, MD, made a highly successful transition to new software six years ago.

"Try to talk not just with the owner, the sales team, and the programmers but also with clients whose names they give you, and other contacts you make on your own," Mee advises. "Talking to other users is a great way—one of the best—to invest your time." Staffing World 2009 will take place Oct. 20–23 in Orlando, FL.

5. Ditch the RFP

If you lack the time and technical expertise to craft an exhaustive request for proposal, think about preparing what's called a "demo script" instead. According to Moss, a demo script describes what you want your software to do in helping you achieve a business result. For instance, a script called "A Day in the Life of a Recruiter" might describe the five actions that go into a successful placement. Moss explains, "You don't ask the suppliers to answer a 50-page RFP. You hand them a demo script and say, 'Show me how the software does what I want it to do. Don't tell me—show me.' And you can see how it works in real time."

Whether the demo takes place in person or remotely, choosing a script over an RFP can save both you and the suppliers on your short list time, money, and confusion.

6. Watch for Red Flags

Now that you're communicating with a short list of finalists, be sure to look past the giveaways and keep the following words of warning from experts in mind:

- Think twice about buying from a start-up; you don't want to be stuck without support or maintenance should the provider go out of business.
- Conversely, avoid experienced companies if they don't release new products or upgrade their software every six to 12 months.
- Be skeptical of sales reps who are passionate about their very different product when no one else in the industry seems to be; there's probably a good reason why the innovation didn't catch on.
- Be wary of companies that put down the competition. Instead of trying to scare you into narrowing your options, a reputable supplier will make a reasonable, powerful case for its unique strengths and for the benefits you can expect to achieve.

7. Pick a Winner

As you make your final pick, you might want to keep one question in mind: "Which supplier will provide the best user experience?" The experts interviewed for this article contend that the quality of the user experience is what sets elite staffing software companies apart. Says Mee, "On a supplier's homepage, if there's a fun interface, if it's chock-full of information that helps create a staffing-centric community, you know it's a progressive company that really gets it."

Perfect Partners

Software providers can design screens with visual appeal, craft navigation that's unusually simple, provide regular upgrades and new releases, create user communities with blogs and outreach such as sponsorships of industry events, and more.

But there's one more thing a software company must do to show that it's the right technology firm for your staffing firm. A consistent focus on you, the user, may be the best way to tell that you've successfully navigated the difficulties of the software-selection process and chosen the right technology partner for your people-oriented business.

Find a Technology Supplier

Insights for this article were provided by the ASA technology advisory subcommittee. Composed of representatives from companies that supply technology products and services to the staffing industry, the subcommittee works to help the staffing industry maximize its use of technology in day-to-day operations to save time and increase profits.

To find a technology supplier for your staffing firm, visit the ASA Web site at americanstaffing.net.

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