



I recently spoke with a friend who had purchased an environment, health, and safety (EH&S) software company. His firm is growing when others are shrinking. How is this possible? Across all industry sectors, information technology (IT) departments are facing ever-tightening budget constraints and staffing cuts. And now government agencies are undergoing budget and staff cuts, just as the private sector began three years ago. Given these challenges, and the fact that EH&S is often given low priority in corporate budgets, how do you keep reasonably current in the EH&S IT area during difficult times? Part of the answer is the “KISS” rule, or “Keep It Simple (you fill in the last word).” This column discusses several ways to simplify your EH&S solutions, building upon advice from well-known simplicity guru Elaine St. James.

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Use your time wisely. A strategic approach, coupled with an understanding of the relationships among time, costs, and the value added by management information systems, provides a significant advantage. Organizations are starting to see the benefits of spending time on strategy and planning, in light of today's limited resources.

Spend the time to ensure that users have the proper skill sets to get the most out of your EH&S system. Despite the supposed timesavings lauded by proponents of automation, an automated management system rarely saves time if users do not have the appropriate training and understanding of the system.

Reduce time and resources required to maintain EH&S applications. Consider outsourcing maintenance or using an application service provider (ASP), through which you can lease the software. For client/server or Web-based applications installed on your servers, the software comprises 30–40% of the budget and ongoing operations make up 60–70%. Consider an ASP application where you have a smaller initial investment, a faster implementation, and lower ongoing costs.

LESS IS MORE

Get your priorities straight. When stakeholders are asked to prioritize their needs, the result is that everything is top priority, a “must have.” It's hard to maintain more than three priorities at any time, so select two or three key areas where software can help, then find a solution that will meet these needs and can be delivered quickly. You can always design flexibility for future needs into the program.

JUST SAY NO

Stick to your priorities. Resist the temptation to build a solution that tries to please all stakeholders by serving diverse, possibly conflicting, needs. Trying to please everyone is difficult, and few stakeholders will be happy with such a solution. Instead, use a collaborative approach to gain consensus on the design. The definition of consensus used here is “the judgment arrived at by most of those concerned” (as opposed to unanimity).

Avoid “project scope creep,” a big reason that many IT initiatives fail. Stick to your priorities and keep reasonable boundaries on the project scope to help your initiative be a success. Remember, less is more. You can always add new features to the system later if it is designed properly.

Use the right tools and say “no” to lots of added extras. For example, if all you want to do is balance your checkbook, you may find it easier, faster, and cheaper to use paper and pencil compared to a complex computer software package that also helps manage your budget and investments. But don’t say “no” too quickly. You might find some of these added features useful, and nice to have.

STANDARDIZE

Develop and adhere to a unifying framework—IT managers are under intense pressure to reduce the diversity of hardware, operating systems, and business applications. As software and IT services increase in complexity, costs can rise if your organization lacks a strategy. There is no easy answer on how to standardize, and some IT professionals recommend looking at *standards* rather than *standardization*.

Resist the urge to customize. Today’s commercial EH&S software solutions are more feature-rich than ever before. If you are realistic in your expectations, you are likely to find an off-the-shelf system that meets 80% of your needs. If you are like many others in the market, you are put off by solutions that require excessive customization and a long time to implement. Consider applying your resources to areas other than customization, since your ongoing costs will be lower if you don’t have to maintain and upgrade features built just for you.

TALK IT UP

Communicate. Many stakeholders are afraid of the IT department. Why? Because they don’t understand the terminology, don’t understand the whole development process, or weren’t involved in priority setting or consensus building. Communicate the right amount of detail on strategies and tactics to the right people at the right time. Avoid technical jargon and keep communications simple, so all stakeholders understand. Consider using a liaison to help with your communications, that is, someone who understands EH&S, as well as IT issues, and understands your business climate.

POSSESSION IS NINE-TENTHS OF THE LAW

Give away some of your possessions. Resist the urge to maintain custody of an explosion of EH&S spreadsheets, standalone systems, and custom one-off systems. You may find it easier to deal with the clutter than to get rid of systems that you no longer use. Remember, maintaining lots of different systems costs you time and money. Periodically take stock of the systems you have, and make sure they add value to your EH&S efforts. If you can’t be objective, then seek help from a qualified professional to reduce the clutter.

Five Tips for Tough Times

When *CIO Magazine* recently interviewed state CIOs, it found several trends in how these experts meet the challenge of providing high levels of service in poor economic times.

- 1 Establish a cross-functional team of representatives from different departments, business units, or agencies in your organization to help you prioritize.
- 2 Evaluate and consider the value of the project to end users or customers.
- 3 Determine whether you can leverage your investment in a technology that you’re considering by scaling it to a larger group of users.
- 4 Figure out if there are ways you can further reduce the maintenance and support costs for a technology that might otherwise get the ax.
- 5 Identify which of your most important IT projects and initiatives align or diverge with your company’s strategic plans or agency’s policy goals. Keep the ones that are in alignment. Sideline the ones that aren’t.

Source: Meredith Levinson, “Dire States,” *CIO Magazine*, June 1, 2003; www.cio.com.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS IS...

...What really matters. If you know what really matters, then you can work toward a solution. The problem is, you may not understand what you really need. Enlist someone who understands EH&S, strategic, and IT issues to help you determine what really matters and to arrive at a solution that meets your greatest needs and provides the most value.

In these tough times, organizations can keep IT simple by applying the methods above. The end result should offer one big reward: less complexity to manage! ☺

About the Author

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