

CREATE YOUR SUCCESS STORY:

Tips for a Successful Software Implementation

By Courtney Unruh, Peartree Software

Business management software can make your business more efficient and more profitable. But - there is an element of risk in every software implementation. Everyone has heard horror stories about software implementations going awry, but this does not have to be you! Follow the tips below and make your software implementation a success story - not a horror story.

Understand the Time and Commitment Required.

A business management software implementation must be viewed as an investment, not as an expense. And as with any investment, you need to do everything in your power to ensure that the return on your investment is substantial. It is your responsibility to make the implementation a success by setting the right expectations upfront.

Sam and Debbi Parks, owners and operators of Camp-Out RV in Stratford, Ontario, are three-time veterans of the software implementation process. They say that each implementation "became easier and easier." With each software change, the Parks learned that implementations require a lot of effort on the part of the owner and the employees.

As a business owner you must understand that implementing business management software is not as simple as purchasing and installing a shrink wrapped software package. Thousands of technical details specific to your site need to come together to make your implementation a success. From meetings with the software vendor and your employees to software training and testing, a considerable commitment of time and resources will be required of you.

The Parks also realized that implementations are never flawless. Sam says "There needs to be a level of tolerance for any change, whether it's a new product line or new

software." You can't expect it to work perfectly right away, but if you commit to the implementation, the benefits to your business will far outweigh any challenges.

Identify Your Business Goals.

Every successful software implementation should begin with clear, achievable business goals. The simple fact that you are interested in new software implies that your current method of business management could be improved. After all, why would you expend so much time, money, and energy on new software if your current business processes meet all of your needs? Identify what processes are too time consuming; what processes are inadequate; and what processes are missing from your business management method altogether. Equipped with a clear understanding of your business management issues, you can set clear, definitive goals you wish the software to address.

"Every successful software implementation should begin with clear, achievable business goals."

Once you have set specific goals for the software you need to communicate these goals to both the software vendor and your employees. Armed with specific goals you expect to achieve with the new software, you will be in an excellent position to measure the success of the implementation.

Eliminate Inefficient Business Processes.

Before the software is implemented at your business you must eliminate

inefficient business processes. As Debbi Parks points out, "It takes a lot of preparation internally." You cannot expect the new software to improve your business if inefficient business practices are upheld. For example, if your inventory is inaccurate prior to the software implementation, the new software will not fix it. When you put bad information into the software, you will get bad information out of it.

Choose a Project Champion

One person needs to take ownership of the project. Commonly the business owner takes on this role, but often this is not the best decision. The project champion is responsible for every aspect of the implementation and needs to devote a significant amount of time to the implementation process. If you do not have enough time, it is best to assign this role to someone else in your organization.

The project champion must be involved in every step of the process to ensure that each element of your business is prepared to meet the challenge of the software implementation. The project champion needs more than business experience. They need the support and respect of management and end users alike. As well, they need the foresight to see the long term benefits of the implementation. They will be in charge of communicating the software expectations and implementation progress to both users and management. As well, the project champion will be responsible for communicating with the software vendor throughout the entire process. Someone with a positive attitude and strong problem solving skills will be well suited to the role.

Stay Involved.

Even if you decide to assign a project champion other than yourself, it is necessary for you to stay involved in the implementation process. Everyone must know that

the business owner supports the project. If your support is not communicated, employees might think that the project is unimportant and unsupported. Employees will be less motivated to make the project work if they think that the owner does not care about it.

Keys to Effective Communication

Effectively communicating your expectations of the software and of your employees is vital for the success of your software implementation.

Be assertive: You must be clear and leave no room for ambiguity or misunderstandings. Say exactly what you mean, not what you think people want to hear.

Allow people to ask questions: Often people go without vital information because they are afraid to ask questions. Make sure your employees know that questions are welcome.

Listen: Make sure you really listen to what your employees are saying. Don't immediately give advice, become defensive, or tell them how to feel.

Ask for help: Consider your software vendor your best friend during the implementation. Don't be afraid to call with questions. That's what they are there for.

Prepare your Hardware.

When purchasing new software you need to make sure that your hardware can support it. There is no point expending time, money, and energy on new software if insufficient hardware systems are going to impede the software's success. A

software vendor will recommend minimum hardware requirements. You should take these recommendations seriously. If a vendor does not inquire about your current hardware, make sure you clarify with them that your hardware is adequate. If your hardware is inadequate it will likely cause system crashes and poor software performance. This will increase user frustration and decrease user acceptance and usage.

Phase the Implementation.

Whenever possible, it is best to phase the software implementation into stages. For example, implement the inventory module first and follow with the service, sales, and financial modules once you have a handle on the first. A phased implementation is less stressful and allows users to become comfortable with the application module by module. In addition, the learning curve for each subsequent stage will be lessened.

A phased implementation enables you to see the benefits of the software quickly. As well, with each successful module implementation employees gain a sense of accomplishment and their confidence in the software will increase. As a result, enthusiasm and support of the new software will be heightened.

Communicate Your Expectations.

You need to communicate the importance of the project to your employees. If your employees understand that the implementation is vital for the growth of the business they will be more likely to embrace the new software. Let your employees know how you expect the software to benefit the company and how each employee will be affected by the change.

It is inevitable that some people will resist the new software. Sam and Debbi Parks say that "The biggest challenge is getting everyone on board." There are many reasons why employees might resist the new software. Some people just do not like change; some feel their job security is threatened; some fear failure; and

some just don't see the relevance of the implementation. The most effective way to manage this resistance is to communicate the importance of the implementation.

The Parks point out that it is necessary to communicate honestly with your employees. If you tell your employees that the software will immediately solve all of their problems you may initially gain their support but there will be even more resistance when frustration sets in with learning a new skill. Employees need to know that there is a learning curve and that the first few weeks may be challenging. That is when your support will be crucial.

Ensure Adequate End User Training.

When determining the time frame for the implementation, ensure that you allow adequate time for training. If your dealership is large, establish a core user group to receive training directly from the software vendor. Once this group of people is trained, it will be their responsibility to train the remainder of the employees. It is beneficial for the training to occur away from the business. Debbi Parks encourages training at the vendor's site because you can "focus" and "get away from everything." Training early in the week is also beneficial. The quicker your employees can begin utilizing the training they received back at your dealership, the less information is lost.

After the initial training it is helpful to do follow up training a few months after the software implementation. This will enable your staff to use the software more effectively and eventually to fully master all aspects of the software.

Involve the Right People.

Evaluate the people you have working for you and ask yourself if they can meet the demands of the software implementation. Some employees might not have adequate computer knowledge to meet the needs of the new software and others might not have the desire to use the new system. Sometimes positions need to be restructured, created, or even eliminated to

ensure the success of the software implementation.

At Camp-Out RV, the Parks realized that they had to reorganize their current employee-base to make the software implementation a success. Several positions were restructured and employees were cross-trained. As well, one position was eliminated and two new employees were hired to make up for learning curves and computer knowledge deficiencies. The new employees were beneficial because they were computer savvy and because they were not familiar with the previous software that was in use at Camp-Out RV. Unlike existing employees, they could not revert to old processes and were thus able to motivate others to look towards the future. As Sam Parks says, "You need to train employees to look ahead, not back." Hiring new employees was part of the Parks' success.

Utilize the Parallel Testing Process.

When the new software is implemented it is best to utilize parallel testing. This means that you use both the new software and your old software for a period of time. Typically the testing process lasts between two weeks and one month. The legacy system remains the main operating system, but all information entered into the legacy system is duplicated in the new system. Both systems operate concurrently, process all of the same information, and are expected to produce the same results. During this time any potential deficiencies that may exist in the new system or the legacy system are identified and remedied.

Maintain Open Communication with Your Vendor.

It is very important to maintain an open line of communication with your software vendor throughout the entire implementation. The project champion, whether yourself or someone else, should be the primary contact for the vendor. With one person responsible for

communicating with the vendor, the chance of miscommunication is reduced.

In the early stages of the implementation, both the project champion and the vendor must communicate their expectations, as well as any concerns or questions that they might have. For the first week or so you should schedule daily phone meetings. During these meetings you can discuss how the implementation is going and raise any questions or concerns you or your staff might have. In later weeks, you should continue to have phone meetings on a weekly basis, or as needed, to ensure that the implementation goes smoothly.

Enforce Usage.

Regardless of old inefficiencies, employees will probably want to revert to the old system because they are more comfortable with it. Sam Parks warns that employees will compare the new software to the old system, trying to find flaws with the new.

So how do you enforce usage? The answer was simple for Sam and Debbi Parks: don't give them any other options. After just two weeks of parallel testing, the Parks realized that their employees were barely using the new software so they took the old system away. This

technique, however, is not your only option. To enforce usage, you must make yourself aware. Know when employees are using the system and when they are not and communicate to them that they must use the new system.

Decide When to Implement.

Regardless of the time of year, you will always be able to find some reason why now is not a good time to implement new software. Deciding when to implement is a personal decision. Sam and Debbi Parks found that three months prior to their busiest season was the best time for them. They were able to see the full functionality of the software, but did not have the pressure of implementing a new system when they were extremely busy. Sam also found that it was not ideal to implement software in their slowest season because staff have "too much time to think about the 'what ifs', rather than focusing on getting the job done."

There will never be a perfect time to undergo change that impacts your entire business, so do it as soon as you feel you are ready. Just remember; any challenges that you might face will be far outweighed by the benefits of a successful implementation.

Mistakes You Can't Afford to Make

Scope is too large: Don't become overwhelmed by an implementation that is larger than you can realistically accomplish. Implement the software in phases and avoid adding unnecessary software functionality.

Expectations are not communicated: Tell your employees how you expect the software to benefit the company and how each employee will be affected by the change. If they understand the value of the software they will be less likely to resist the change.

Management is not involved: Management support must be communicated. If employees think that management does not support the project, the project appears unimportant and unnecessary.

Usage is not Enforced: If employees are allowed to revert to old processes, the training they received on the new system will be lost and software acceptance and usage stunted.



Peartree Software offers a complete business management solution for RV dealerships. Dealership is a fully integrated web-based solution with components to help dealers manage all aspects of their business. More information about Dealership can be found on Peartree's Website: www.ptsoft.com or by contacting Peartree Software at 1-877-862-7327 or rvinfo@ptsoft.com.