Take the stress away

Why talk is key to making technology work

IT'S SAFE TO SAY that most CEOs know two things about new technology. One, it can generate tremendous productivity and customer-service improvements. Second, those improvements can be hard to come by.

After all, failed implementations of salesforce automation software, customer-relationship management systems and other "revolutionary" tools continue to receive bad press. Phrases like "bloatware" suggest we're simply overwhelmed by new technology. One oft-quoted report suggests that most people use just 5% of the features of Microsoft Word. I know I'm in that category.

Yet we can't lay all the blame on the technology industry. Fact is: too many companies devote too few resources to helping people understand, accept and benefit from change. Most people don't like change. Unfortunately, change is what new technology brings about.

The need for effective change management is clearly seen in a study by California-based technology consultancy Byte Back. It found that only 12% of office staff are "eager adopters" who quickly embrace new technology. Another 59% are "hesitant 'prove-its'" who adopt new technology only after they're shown how it will improve their lives. And then there are the 29% known as "resistors". When it comes to new technology, "they do not like it, want it or find it enjoyable."

All told, 9 of 10 workers would rather avoid new technology. What happens when they have to tackle it head-on? Some 80% of Canadian managers say workplace stress increased after their companies introduced new technologies and ways of working, according to an Athabasca University poll. "New ways of working and new technologies can crush self-confidence," say the study's authors, adding that staff can "take technological snafus as reflecting a personal shortcoming."

With such resistance and stress, it's no wonder the benefits of technology elude so many firms. How can you increase the returns on your tech investments? I'd recommend four things.

First, develop a corporate culture that accepts and encourages change. To do this, senior management must lead by example. Do not, for instance, expect front-line staff to buy into your new CRM software when you and your sales execs won't load your prospect lists into the system.

Second, recognize that you aren't simply dropping in new technology – rather, you're asking people to drop ages-old customs and habits. What's more, you're forcing them to abandon their expertise in the old way of doing things. Suddenly, experienced and confident employees can feel like it's their first day on the job – an unnerving experience for most of us. They give up all that... and for what? That's the critical question you must address. Help them understand how they'll benefit personally from the switch and demonstrate what they can do to make the technology pay back. In fact, three-quarters of organizational change initiatives fail, usually because no one tells employees what is going on.

Third, communicate the big picture. If you are installing a new order-entry system, don't just teach operators how to key in their transactions. Instead, illustrate how their involvement, however small, will contribute to the success of your entire organization. They're more likely to take pride in their new work if they see that connection.

Fourth, create a sense of urgency. A London Business School study found that only 10% of workers actively participate in new organizational initiatives. Another 30% procrastinate, 20% are disengaged and 40% are too distracted by personal matters to become involved. You have to demonstrate why your workers should buy into your new technology *now*.

For years, big firms struggled with change management. They've learned that communicating a sound business case and the individual rewards of new technology can help ease implementation as each opportunity comes along. Emulate their practices, and maybe you'll find things much easier in your organization. ■

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Does CRM work?

A recent members poll by the Toronto-based Association of Internet Marketing and Sales (AIMS) suggests Canadian businesses remain wary of customer-relationship management systems. Why? Respondents said CRM is too complicated (48%), too expensive (43%) or not worth the risk of failure (6%). However, 80% said the best way to implement CRM is one department or customer group at a time rather than company-wide. About two-thirds of those polled use CRM in their organizations.