

## A computer is a business tool... spell IT

July 2000

Does your IT investment drive you where you want to go, or have you broken down along the way? Hal Harper, Communications Manager at PDMS asks the question.

A computer is a business tool... spell IT Does your IT investment drive you where you want to go, or have you broken down along the way? Hal Harper, Communications Manager at PDMS asks the question.

It's the end of your financial year. The time on the business calendar to wind up your accountant and stitch up the Taxman. A time to see just how many of those hard won petrol-receipts really can be put down to business use and, most especially, a time to replace cars, kit and caboodle. In that order.

So to the car. You arrive at the dealership in excited anticipation and, as you are greeted by the greasy, Burton-clad salesman (think Bob Monkhouse with dyed-blond hair), you remind yourself not to go too mad. Something executive but not too flash. In matt silver perhaps. At which point, your reverie is interrupted by the target-hungry salesman.

"Got something in you'll love", he winks conspiratorially.

"0 to 60 in 2.5 nanoseconds, 1,000,000 Bhp at 4,000 revs, independent quadruple funny-bone suspension, intercooled super-doooper twin bi-turbo thingamajig and treble wosname joint struts... front and rear... laaarvely!"

Even as he spouts it, you know that the patter is a mixture of nonsense, bravado and flimsy untruths - and not even a subtle one at that... yet it sounds so good that you desperately want to believe him. And, foolishly, you do.

One month later, waiting for the RAC on the hard-shoulder of the A404 and cursing the day you laid eyes on this petrol guzzling, unreliable and frankly ugly beast you've been lumbered with, you wonder just exactly how you managed to let yourself fall for it.

Not me; not ever, I can hear you think. But ask yourself a question. Substitute the car analogy for your IT investment and current suppliers and how far from reality are we really talking? In many cases, not that far, I'll wager.

Having been sold on little more than a tidal wave of enthusiastic fresh air, how many businesses are out there at this very moment, I wonder, cursing their petrol guzzling, unreliable, ugly IT systems as they stand waiting on the IT equivalent of the A404's hard shoulder?

If only I'd thought about what I really wanted / needed beforehand, they'll no doubt be cursing.

By its very nature, IT is a technical business and yet therein lies the paradox. If, in business terms, IT is first and foremost a tool and should be regarded as such, why then, like our salesman, do so many IT suppliers (and buyers it must be said, can be just as guilty) begin deployment from a technical rather than a commercial perspective?

Whilst no organisation will employ extra staff or retain new premises unless there is firm business justification for doing so, for some unfathomable reason this pragmatism too often gets lost where IT investment is concerned. Why? Because more often than not the sheer complexities and technicalities of the deal mean that the supplier dictates the agenda - you're in their hands.

Even rarer is the company that will allow its employees to write their own salary cheques. But seemingly, where IT is concerned, a supplier can walk away with a whole book full of signed blank cheques with barely a murmur of concern from the client as long as their line in technical sounding banter is convincing enough.

We are of course talking about the difference between 'buying' and being 'sold to'. In any technical market it's incredibly easy to, as one commentator put it, become preoccupied with 'speeds and feeds', neglecting business cause and effect and losing site of the ultimate goal - what or wherever that might be. But where the supplier may be talking bandwidth, Intranets, CRM and the like, the bottom line that really counts is the one drawn under words like productivity, profitability and efficiency.

It's fair to say then, that as a bare minimum, you need an IT supplier - or more precisely an IT guide - whom you can trust to put the needs of your business first. And, contrary to surprisingly popular misconception, in IT as with every other business function, this has to be driven by sound business reasoning.

So before even thinking about making an investment in IT, large or small and whether in hardware, software, services or otherwise, it's important to think about the business agenda first. Consider the whys, whats, hows and wherefores of the enterprise and based upon the answers to those questions decide what KIND of supplier might best suit the needs of the organisation.

Better still, try to find a supplier that shares this philosophy (they are out there). One that will ask those questions both for you and of you.

And the road doesn't end here. Even having found the right supplier it is crucial to recognise that the long-term challenge lies not only in guide we use but also in the route we take, our starting point and our final destination. To labour the admittedly slightly tenuous car analogy, unless you know exactly where you want to go, it's impossible to find out where to start from and which road you should take to get there.

Here, it's about controlling the relationship. Ensuring that the business's very raison d'etre isn't brushed under the technical carpet - because that's surprisingly easily done if you're not careful.

This isn't to say that technical know-how isn't important - like every business function, it has a place and a time. But there is a certain symmetrical irony to be found in this entire argument.

Find the right supplier, follow the right path and build the right kind of technical partnership and you won't need technical savvy. Because when the deployment of technology is truly driven from a business agenda then your tech-knowledge will be almost - if not entirely - irrelevant. And because, put another way, the supplier should be dealing with all the stuff under the bonnet.

It's true. Give it some thought next time you're stuck on the hard shoulder of the A404.

Published in Money Media, July 2000