

Generation X

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PDMS recently celebrated its tenth anniversary and whilst this is no time at all in many industries, in IT it represents several generations. In that time we have seen at least two major booms with all of the attendant bandwagons, enrichment of lawyers and venture capitalists, and ultimate disappointment and exhaustion for many of the participants. To be fair, we have also seen some remarkable successes with new companies and new ideas making a massive impact in a very short time.

The importance of being the first in the field with a new idea, known as 'first mover advantage', was one of the great delusions of the internet bubble. The truth is that pioneering any radical new idea is going to be hugely expensive, where as learning from other peoples mistakes is much cheaper, if not as glamorous. There are some exceptions, but on the whole improving on an established business model by doing it better and cheaper is a safer bet than doing something completely new.

Similarly, we have seen many generations of technology all promising, with varying degrees of accuracy, to be the answer to the prayers of business with lower cost of ownership, unparalleled performance and infinite flexibility. On the other hand, we have also seen the stubborn refusal of many hopelessly obsolete systems to die, despite the overwhelming logic of the latest and greatest alternative. Systems that work will tend to live much longer than technologists would advise us.

In ten years PDMS have undertaken hundreds of projects and we are extremely proud of our success. When the going gets tough, as occasionally some projects do, PDMS pride themselves in never backing away but ensuring completion with the ultimate aim of achieving the satisfaction of the customer. There is considerable pride and satisfaction in completing a complex business system and seeing it in use, often by many thousands of people all over the world. Getting there takes a lot of skill and determination, not to mention patience, goodwill and effective project management. PDMS have learned a great deal about technology, but more importantly, we have learned about the realities of getting things done.

For many organisations, purchasing major business software can be notoriously difficult; it is often going to be an upheaval to change the way an organisation works and the costs tend to be difficult to control if not managed correctly. There are a number of ways to manage this purchasing process each with its own advantages and pitfalls. UK public sector organisations are bound by strict procurement rules and therefore always go out to tender if a project exceeds a certain size. They also often stipulate that they are looking for an off the shelf product. This "product buy" approach is intended to reduce the risks, which are often attributed to the alternative, the bespoke software development approach. In practice, however, it is often not the

case and in our experience a well managed and designed bespoke development, using a tried and tested component based approach, can often be more cost effective and provide a better fit to the clients requirements.

To begin with organisations very rarely have a complete understanding of their own requirements; this is not simply a public sector problem, it can be a feature of any large software project for any organisation. As a result it is difficult for suppliers to fix a price to meet requirements not yet fully defined or understood. Similarly a product selected at this stage may be superb at doing what it does but a poor fit for the ultimate business need.

In fact writing a good specification of requirements is an extremely difficult task, non-technical staff will always tend to describe the system they want by pointing out the things that are wrong with the system they have. This approach takes too little account of the inherent opportunity for improving productivity by changing the way people work with a new system while incorporating the benefits often provided by new technologies. Technical people, on the other hand, tend to want to stipulate the precise technical makeup of a new system thus restricting the options for business innovation.

Structured development methodologies, management techniques, quality systems coding standards and all manner of good advice proliferate as endless organisations and individuals go through the same learning experiences. All attempt to codify common sense and understanding but there is no substitute for experience. The truth is that business systems are always more complicated than they appear at first sight and projects always have their low points. The real key to successful projects is for all of the participants to have an equal stake in the success of the enterprise and more importantly, to have a shared understanding of ALL the processes required to make the project a success