

Technology Decisions

An Operational Approach

BY WENDY K. ZURSTADT

I'd like to tell you that selecting the right technology for your club is not as difficult as you may think. But, I'd be lying. There is no "easy button," no magic formula and no one single person who will give you the answer. It is no different than any other project that requires an investment of time as well as capital. What works for your peers may not be the solution for you. The professional association network

ence, and they should not be left out of the process, but the ultimate decision rests with the executives who lead your club.

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staff to gather this information — the people who are truly "hands on" daily and deal with software and support when needed. Make sure they know they are an integral part of achieving the best solution for the club. You must get buy in from them. You cannot force a new system on the staff; it just doesn't work. Some clubs bring in a consultant for the process. That may be helpful depending on the size and needs of your club. It is not the consultant's job to make the decision for you; it is their responsibility to guide the process.

How

A request for proposal or request for information should be completed by your IT professional and submitted to the vendors. The IT professional should be gathering information from the club staff in order to prepare the request to ensure a complete document. This is very helpful for the vendors when prepared properly. Club systems must work well from the perspective of the technology that runs it as well as the features of the software. While you may not care about the operating system, your IT professional certainly will. A formal request will address hardware needs as well as software and of course, interfaces to other applications. It is almost impossible to find one fully integrated software product that can handle all of the operations of a club; again, it depends on your club. Spa software, catering software, tee time management, payroll, reservations, etc., are all areas that may be best supplied by other providers.

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is a great resource and forum, but the answer isn't there either. The answer is at your club, in the hands of the users — the key managers, seasoned department heads and the younger workforce who can make the tiniest keyboard tap dance. It is a collective effort by the people who know your club the best, the ones who create the demand that the vendors must satisfy.

It is not uncommon to find that decisions for new club software have been made by the members of the club, whether it is the finance or technology committee, and sometimes the members of the board. However, a working knowledge of club operations is the key to the process, and members of a club are usually not at that level. It certainly helps if they have project management experi-

mentation of new technology for your club is planning, research and evaluation. It is the who, how, what and when that is significant to the success of the project.

Who

Start with the key users of the current system — more than likely a department head meeting will kick off the session. Invite your IT professional, whether they are employees or outsourced. Ask them to identify what needs are currently unfulfilled by the existing system. They should create a pros and cons list because there may be features of the existing system that could be lost by moving to another vendor. There is always give and take when you change systems. The department heads should meet with their key



What

That used to be an easier question to answer. There are always major players in hospitality technology. And throughout the past five years, some new kids on the block have been making a name for themselves. Club-specific systems are, in the long run, going to be your best choice. The vendors understand the niche market, and they've built features that will often be lacking in hotel or property management systems. Don't rule any one of them out initially, and send a request for proposal to all of them. Unless you have clear-cut obstacles, let your request for proposal be your guide.

This is usually where the famous question comes into play. "What are the other clubs using?" I don't know why some people think that club systems are like shoes. It might fit well on the club next door, but that doesn't mean it's the right fit for you. Your club is like no other, and you take pride in that, so don't lose sight of that in this process. Your executives and key staff may have different levels of experience than other clubs, and while personnel may change, your standards don't.

Demos are wonderful as long as you remember a few rules in the game. Some vendors will show you features that aren't available yet. Hopefully they will tell you that. A demo is an overview; it will only give you a glimpse, and you must dig deeper. This is where the research becomes critical. The general manager, CFO, IT professional and department heads must all commit to

the process. System users must attend the demo; when asking a question, it should be phrased as, "Show me how your system handles..." Don't accept the answer of, "Yes, we can do that." If it takes more than 10 keystrokes to get where you want to be or if it's not using one database or you have to go back and forth between applications to get an answer, it's not efficient. If it's not user friendly, it's going to create extra training time and money, not to mention rising stress levels of the staff.

It is all about information and the capture of data. What can I capture, what will it tell me, and how can I convey it to others? What will enable better management of our operations? What services will be enhanced for the staff and for the members? What is the return on investment — and I don't mean dollars.

Reference checks and field trips to visit other clubs are always a good idea, but you must consider the club and personnel with whom you are talking. Their operations will be different, and very often, the level of knowledge of the staff will be different. Ask the hard questions. When making reference checks, keep in mind, the vendors aren't going to provide the names of unhappy customers. Actually, unhappy customers are often the result of poor planning. The setup and training were insufficient for their needs or customizations were not identified upfront. It's not always the fault of the software itself. Key questions should be centered on support and enhancements. Who, how and when on the support issue: do you need local support? Are there user groups? Is the support by e-mail, phone and Internet? And how are enhancements determined, prioritized and implemented? Do you get to choose when and how you receive the enhancements or new releases?

When

If you are seasonal, the obvious choice is going to be the slow season for going live. Pick a target date that is at least one month prior to the height of your season — that's your live date. Now go backwards and look at time for training and setup. Allow one to two months for that. The vendors will tell you that's too long, but they don't know your staff; you do. So, it's your call, not theirs. What does your IT professional need for the implementation process? Does hardware need to be ordered? A new server? What are the needs for more than one location or distance factors? Are there any major events that will complicate the timetable? When are seasonal workers hired?

The first 90 days after you go live may be a roller coaster. It just means that you may need to address some customization to the software that you could not envision prior to the live date or that some operational changes may be necessary. There are often conflicts with applications, and it just takes a little time to address this and work out the kinks. Your vendor will be there for a period of time after you go live depending on your needs. Make sure they are present in the areas you have the most concerns, and invite them back for month end; that is usually defined during the planning stages, but make sure everyone is on the same calendar.

Change brings opportunity, and with solid preparation, planning and most importantly, strong communication, you will be one step closer to enhancing the service and operations of your club. ■

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