

Rocky Mountain News / The Rubber Ceiling  
Software 'solution' bound to bring a host of problems

My company is getting a new software system, and I see nothing but heartache ahead. I went through one of these drills at my last job, so I cringed when I saw the first memo. It's a matter of ballooning expectations.

You start with a few operations and financial types getting frustrated with the old system. "Wouldn't it be great," they say, "if we didn't have to dig through six different reports to make a decision? Wouldn't it be swell if we could get our information dished up any way we want it?" They start looking for new software.

The old system, they soon realize, is like one of those nasty, prune-faced school-marms who had elaborate rules for everything. If you don't follow the rules, you get a ruler across the knuckles. Do it Miss Crabtree's way, the old software demands, or you'll never go to recess. Newer software systems, on the other hand, are kind and gentle. They'll adapt to you and forgive your little shortcomings. They'll draw little smiley faces on your homework.

Yearning to break free and walk out into the sunshine, the corporate guys contact a few vendors and request proposals. This is where the problem starts. The guys go shopping for a software system and come home with an "enterprise-wide software solution."

There was a time when hard-nosed business people dealt exclusively in material goods. If you couldn't see it and touch it, it wasn't worth discussing. Then the pendulum swung, and nowadays it's stuck over in fantasyland. Somebody realized that software – a tangible object that could be put in a box and carried back to the office – could be replicated in a few afternoons by any clever competitor. That's when software companies started selling solutions.

An office that's been bitten by the solution bug is like a kindergarten class waiting for Santa. Everybody starts believing in the solution, and speaking in reverent tones about its magical ability to cure whatever ails the company. Before long, people are convinced that the new system will cut costs, raise revenues, pep up the stock price, eliminate turf wars, and make a new pot of coffee whenever somebody takes the last cup. With a build-up like that, there's nowhere to go but down.

It doesn't take long for the cracks to appear. Costs are higher than expected, and the implementation will take longer. The vendor may have exaggerated just a tad about a few key functions, and back-up systems will have to be set up. Worst of all, the transition from the old system to the new one is guaranteed to make everybody miserable, and bring the finger-waggers out of the woodwork. By the time it's all in place, former friends will be snarling at each other and the entire information technology staff will have quit, been fired, or checked into a rehab facility.

Knowing what I know, I smile wanly when my colleagues get giddy about the digital paradise that awaits. Software is only software, but a solution will break your heart.

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