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# IT – the elephant in the room or the tiger in your tank?

**IT, like death and taxes, is something we simply can't avoid in the modern world. But hopefully we can exercise some degree of control over the what, when and how much involved in our IT projects if we want to avoid it either killing or bankrupting us.**

When it comes to IT the HR space is no different from any other. There are the cheap and cheerful entry level products, the 'big box' corporate solutions and a range of alternatives in the middle with varying degrees of capability and customisation. And we can now opt to have our IT solutions hosted externally and accessible via the internet and a range of smart devices.

How, then, should an HR professional go about scoping their requirements and ensuring they get what they need at the right price?

In this article I will look at a number of issues predominantly from a risk and safety perspective, but which inevitably impact on a broader range of HR functionality.

The first step is to ask yourself, do I really need an external IT solution at all? For many small businesses there are a range of capabilities within standard desktop applications that can deliver much of what you need. Simple spreadsheets of training needs, PPE registers, accident reports, hazard/risk register, a PowerPoint induction and email folders will cover most of your requirements if they are simple and volumes are manageable.

But as the business grows and the issues become more complex the demand for smart technology which can automate

and simplify data management becomes greater. Managers only want to view data relevant to their part of the business and rather than just presenting figures (numbers of accidents), there is a need for more analysis and the ability to look for patterns and trends (frequency rates, causation, costs, days lost, etc). Complex data needs to be presented in more readily understandable ways – dashboards, traffic lights, graphs, etc. with the ability to drill down further as required.

Typically, the broader an IT system gets in terms of scope, the less well each element functions compared to a standalone specialist product and the greater the degree of standardisation required. Modules may be brought in from different suppliers to build a whole system, but unless they have been designed to work seamlessly together, there is likely to be a high cost for integration and implementation.

'Software as a service' is the emerging trend whereby specialist providers develop and licence software so you don't have to buy it or pay for it outright. You get the benefit of learning from the experience of others whilst still having the ability to customise certain elements to meet your specific needs.

Talking to IT specialists is literally like talking another language – which most non-techies (like myself) struggle to understand, not least because it changes from day to day. Who had heard of 'the cloud' three years ago (no, not that structure on Queen's Wharf in Auckland) and who really understands what it means and the implications for issues such as data security?

So the challenge is to make yourself an intelligent customer of IT so that you truly understand your needs and can properly evaluate the costs and risks of the various solutions you will be offered. Alternatively, is there a trusted specialist provider



you can work with to both understand and meet your needs in the most cost-effective way possible?

The first step may be to arm yourself with a good business analyst (BA). Often implementing an IT solution is not just about taking an existing process and automating it. If it is a poor process to start with, then all you have done is to lock yourself into an expensive and inflexible alternative. Often non-specialists focus on the input process, where most of the time is spent, and not on the output – where most of the value is.

A good BA will start off by helping you clarify your business requirements and then think about how IT can help to meet

them. They will be important in helping you identify possible IT partners and will act as an 'honest broker' between you and the provider to ensure their solution can actually deliver what you are looking for – and equally that what you are asking for is realistic and achievable!

Getting the basics right in terms of defining data items, looking at the required relationships between items, ease of input, alignment between existing forms and new screens, describing workflow, agreeing reporting requirements, etc are all critical activities before you can really go out to market. Whilst you may well have to compromise on some of the functionality you have on your wish list, at least you will be doing it from a state of knowledge, rather than suddenly discovering months later that the thing your boss really needed has not been included in the specification.

And it is important to remember that the implementation cost is likely to be significantly higher than the cost of buying or licensing the software – so beware of the seemingly cheap deals, as the supplier will need to make his margin elsewhere.

In planning your investment you need to include internal costs as well as external ones. There will inevitably need to be some data clean-up before you migrate to a new system. You could get an

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admin person to do this, but if they don't understand the structure and purpose of the data, you could risk losing important historical information. Then there is the cost of training staff and some loss of productivity as they come up-to-speed with it, plus someone's time to project manage the whole process.

Modular systems allow you to manage risk by implementing them in a piecemeal fashion at a sustainable pace. If the supplier doesn't deliver then you have not committed too far and can more easily back up the truck. And you can regulate the amount of change you can cope with at any one time. As your business changes you may want to be able to turn functionality on and off to avoid paying for things you don't really need all the time. If you think of your washing machine, wouldn't it be great to only have the three programmes you use every day but were able to select and pay for a special programme just when you needed it?

So who can you trust in this shark-infested minefield? In my view trust has

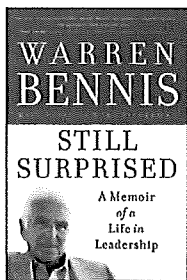
to be earned, so unless you already have a proven relationship with a suitable supplier, it is best to ask around and seek informed feedback from colleagues and through professional networks.

If all of this has not put you off, then moving to a new IT system can be liberating. It can act as a catalyst for change, allow you to unchain yourself from inefficient and ineffective processes and provide real insights into areas of your business performance that were previously invisible. Good IT systems can help you move from 'information pull' where if you know where to look (or who to ask) you might be able to find what you want, to 'information push' where the data is presented to the end user at a time and in a manner they need to help them make appropriate business decisions.

We say people are our greatest asset so let's use the technology now at our disposal to ensure we recruit, retain, support, protect, inform and manage them effectively. ■

## book review by Tracey Paterson

### Still Surprised – a memoir of a lifetime in leadership by Warren Bennis



**W**arren Bennis is arguably the most recognised name in terms of leadership research and this book contains his memoirs.

His life stories provide a fascinating insight into the world and people who shaped his thinking and his theories. This easy to read novel outlines an 80-year leadership journey starting in 1944 in southern Germany where Bennis found

himself a replacement officer in the US army in the final years of World War II. This early experience led him on an academic journey made accessible by the GI return bill and a university choice influenced by his army runner, which saw him attending Antioch University in Ohio. While there he met key influencers and formed a direction for his future research and life.

Not only does Bennis outline experiences that shaped his world but also the people who have led, mentored and influenced him through the decades in the various stages of his life and career. He is an exceptional storyteller who reminds us how the world changed in the last century and how leadership and management concepts we take for granted were

developed by the great thinkers of his time.

His growing awareness and insights set in the climate of the time makes his story personal and accessible – along with the realisation that incidents and accidental meetings are so important in our developing new ways of thinking and being, and relevant to our journeys as leaders.

This book is not strictly a leadership text, although it contains many stories to which the reader can relate their leadership development. One stand-out for me was the contention that the leader of a group must never get overly involved with its sickest member – a "truth of group dynamics" that Bennis learned from Wilfred Bion, a renowned psychiatrist from the Tavistock Institute.

Throughout the memoir we are reminded that Bennis has written and co-authored many leadership texts and has researched this area comprehensively – he defined the difference between managers and leaders – "the manager does things right, the leader does the right things".

For leaders and managers this book provides an insight into a life well lived and reminds us of the setting of the development of much of the research from which we have gained our leadership training. ■