15 Killer Ideas for Making Your Next IT Project a Success

The Gadwall Group™

Tame Your Technology

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The Gadwall Group is a consulting firm specializing in helping you successfully acquire and manage your information technology. We accomplish this mission through our programs and seminars, publications and advisory services. If you feel you're not fully exploiting your investment, we can help.

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been unhappy with a network install? A Web page project that took too long and looked too ugly? An accounting system that didn't meet your needs? A wide area network that didn't?

If you've spent any time in management, you've been through it. You've seen information systems that were poorly purchased, badly installed, and that were pretty much a complete and total disaster.

It doesn't have to be that way. The purpose of this report is to show you the 15 Killer Ideas that you can use to get a fantastic payback on your IT investment.

In the following pages, we'll thoroughly discuss each of these basic concepts:

- Plan
- Use a checklist
- Consider the impact
- Check references
- Meet the owner
- Document everything
- Use professionals
- Plan for failure
- Keep it simple
- Meet the tech
- Keep your options open
- Shop around
- Watch the prices
- Train your staff
- Beware bad advice

Your IT projects CAN be smooth as silk. You CAN be thrilled with your computer systems. All it takes is the use of the fundamental techniques that we will show you in this report.

Killer Idea Number 1 - Plan.

Have a plan. Start off with your goals and objectives, find some professional help, identify any obstacles to success and how you will overcome them, and lay out a time line for your actions - from writing an RFP right through to ongoing management and support.

I have one client who didn't plan. They wanted to convert their accounting software from one of those cheap accounting packages to another one. I think they felt that, since the software was so inexpensive, they didn't have to pay attention to the basics. But because they didn't think the project through, particularly the sequence of actions, they wound up with major trouble. They had to roll back transactions, restate balances, and generally create loads of general ledger entries. I'm sure there is going to be a raised eyebrow or two when the parent company's auditors come in. And they spent a couple of thousand dollars for a temp to do all of this data entry.

If you do nothing else, at least know where you're going and the steps you're going to take to get there.

Killer Idea Number 2 - Use a checklist.

Tying in with Idea Number 1, use a checklist. If you're installing a network, use our checklist (available at www.gadwall.com/whitepapers/) to make sure you've accounted for every component that you'll need. This checklist can work with other technology projects as well, but it is particularly well-suited for the implementation of a local or wide area network.

There are other checklists available for other types of projects, like accounting systems, Web pages, etc. Or you might have to put one together yourself, based on your own research. But don't rely on the vendor or consulting firm to cover everything. You might have a shy sales rep who is nervous about trying to sell you too much. I know it's hard to believe, but it happens every day. Or you might just have a really bright consultant who simply misses something.

Even terrific sales people can miss stuff. Back in my selling days, I got into the habit of adding an extra 5% to every proposal as "miscellaneous." I explained to my customers that I wanted them to budget a little extra to account for hardware and software that I, my engineers, or the vendor missed. In addition, products are discontinued all the time. I wanted to make sure I didn't have to surprise the customer with the news that the new version of the Thingamajig was going to cost $1,000 more than the old one that I had just quoted them.

Ask your vendors if they have a checklist that they use. If they don't, ask how they can assure you that they'll include everything you need. Be wary of the response, "Well, we just know." If so, they should be happy to guarantee that they won't forget anything.

Always remember that it is YOUR responsibility to get this project right. So watch your vendors

and make sure they're covering everything. Almost every project proposal misses something that has to get added later. You can avoid this by matching proposals up against comprehensive checklists.

Killer Idea Number 3 - Consider the impact.

Most information technology will have a remarkable impact on your operations. However, that effect could be good or just as easily be bad. IT is not like other investments where the worst that can happen is you waste some money. If you don't think it through, and carefully evaluate the impact of the project, you'll blow not only a lot of money, but also a great deal of your employees' time, AND you'll make them permanently less productive. Can your business handle that?

If you give all of your employees access to the Internet or email, how will that improve your business? Don't be fooled into thinking that if you employees have "access to the Internet, they'll be more productive." Maybe so, but probably not. Have you considered the fact that both email and the Web are fantastic time-wasters if not managed effectively?

Look at the consequences the system will have. Again, as with Idea Number 2, this is part of planning. How will this system affect your employees and your operations? Will it really improve things as much as the sales rep says? Make him prove it. Will your employees be able to use the new product with or without training, coaching and support? How much will that support cost and who will provide it - expensive consultants or your own overworked staff?

So before you just jump on the bandwagon and buy what you THINK you need, take a deep breath and look at the way it will affect your business, your productivity and your staff. If you can't see a positive, net benefit, why are you doing it?

Killer Idea Number 4 - Check references.

When was the last time you really thoroughly checked the references of your computer consultants? For that matter, when did you check your employees' references, particularly that non-starter you've been unhappy with since a week after you hired him?

The information you need may be tough to get, but it IS out there, even if you have to read between the lines. Check references of any consultants or vendors you plan to hire. Here are the basics:

Get five references. They should all be similar to you in size and type of industry. They should also be using the same product that the vendor is proposing to you. Try to get local references, as opposed to successful engagements on the far side of the moon.

Check the references. Make telephone calls to set up appointments to visit. Yes, VISIT them. Don't just settle for a brief phone conversation. You'll get better answers if you can meet with the vendor's customers face to face. Buy them lunch. It'll be the best investment you can make.

Find out how happy they are with the vendor, what the response time was to problems, whether or not they are still using the technology that you're discussing, installation, support and performance problems, quality issues, and how they're using the system. Technology gets replaced very quickly...more often than the reps know. You might get some useful information if the reference has moved to a different solution. Also you might get some ideas about how you can better use the technology.

Another nice thing about checking references is the contact you'll make. Maybe you'll find a new business partner. Or even better, a customer.

You may find that your favorite vendor doesn't have the recommended references. That's OK. This is when you can negotiate a better deal. It's tough to find five good references for one firm, particularly a small one with newer technology. But insufficient references serves as a warning that you must be even more careful with the other suggestions in this report. References show the type of vendor you're working with and their expertise. If you can't get enough information, you'll have to go much slower and be a lot more careful.

A final note on references. Make sure the vendor knows, at the beginning of your relationship, that you'll be asking for references. Don't actually ask for them until you've settled on one or two companies, but don't surprise them either. If they don't have the references you demand, you and they have both wasted a whole bunch of time. It's better to let them know ahead of time. If they understand that you're going to demand and thoroughly check them out, the unqualified will probably not waste your time and you can find a more suitable candidate.

Killer Idea Number 5 - Meet the owner.

Early in your relationship with the vendor, particularly a service or consulting company, meet the chief executive. Don't let them pass off the sales manager. You want to meet the president or general manager - the "big dog." If you're dealing with a branch office, then meet the local manager.

Having this august personage's business card in your Rolodex can make your project much smoother. She'll take a personal interest in your project and understand your objectives. If she came up through the ranks, she'll be able to spot potential problem areas that less experienced employees may have missed. The rep and other staff on the project will also know that, if there are problems, you'll be able to call her directly and get them resolved.

If you can't get this individual to visit you, then move on to another vendor. You're obviously too small for the vendor and you'll get lost in the shuffle.
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Killer Idea Number 6 - Document everything.

Accept no verbal promises like, "Oh yeah, that's included in the price. I didn't put it on the quote? Sorry. But trust me, it's in there." Does this kind of conversation ring a bell? We've all been through it.

Get it in writing. It doesn't have to be in the form of a legal-sized contract with fine print and numbered paragraphs. But you need to have documentation of ALL - I repeat, ALL - of the commitments that the vendor is making.

Develop a scope of work. Even if the vendor does it, you should do your own, at least sketching out the basics. The scope should include YOUR objectives for the project, the methods that will be used to complete the project, the time frames and project deadlines, and the acceptance criteria. These are measurable results that you and the vendor will use to declare a project completed and payable. Both you and the vendor should agree on this scope and sign it.

If you don't document every stage of the process, including changes and revisions, with emails, faxes, letters, revised scopes, etc., then you're almost guaranteeing disaster.

Killer Idea Number 7 - Use professionals.

Don't use family or friends unless they are professionals and are in the business that you're talking about. The IT project "hall of shame" is full of stories about business owners who let their buddy, who is a "PC expert," install their networks and create their databases. And many a son or daughter has implemented dad's Web site, only to lose interest when they discovered parties at college.

What you'll find, when you hire non-professionals, is that you have no reliable support for your systems and virtually no documentation. Your relatives and pals usually don't have extensive real-world experience, and only know what they've read in trade magazines (a notoriously unreliable source). Plus, if they do a bad job, how do you fire them?

Either do it yourself or hire professionals to do it for you. And beware of doing it yourself. You've got better things to do than constantly fuss with your Web page or fix a printer driver for your accounts payable clerk. Besides, who said you were an expert?

Killer Idea Number 8 - Plan for failures.

The system will fail. Either there will be problems during the implementation, or it will crash and burn a couple of years after you've absolutely come to rely on it. But it will fail. Plan for those failures. Find out what your options are for tech support and maintenance programs. What are the vendor's response times? Make a sample call to their tech support line on Monday morning and see how long the wait is. If you're buying a service, such as Web hosting, what contingency plans does the vendor have for power and communications failures, etc?

And as mentioned above, you might want to budget a couple of extra dollars for missed items during the installation.

Killer Idea Number 9 - Keep it simple.

Don't try to do everything at once. If your eventual plan is to have a local area network, an MRP system with an integrated extranet Web site, frame-relay connectivity to all of your offices, an email and scheduling package, brand new desktop computers, new word processing and spreadsheet software, and video conferencing, you might want to start with the network and desktops. Even if you have the money, you can't afford it. Take it slow, and get one hunk of the technology installed and mastered before you attack the next piece.

Hershey and Whirlpool were in the news recently for having tried to implement big complex ERP systems all at once. In both instances, they had huge problems, including late deliveries, upset customers and lost sales. If these companies can have problems, don't think that your nimble small business is immune.

Killer Idea Number 10 - Meet the tech.

Consulting firms will tell you that you're hiring the firm, not the individual. Which is a bunch of hooey. The work will be done by individual technicians and engineers, and you should be comfortable with who you're getting. If you're not happy, and they're not the right fit, or they're not as qualified as the vendor claims, your project will get slowed down and possibly damaged. Yes, the firm might assign another engineer, but they're often uncooperative about it, and may not have another skilled worker available.

When you meet the employees who will be assigned to your project, and you've approved them, get written agreement that they will be the ones assigned to your project. Remember about documenting everything in Idea 6? If you don't get that guarantee, start negotiating on price, or go elsewhere.

Killer Idea Number 11 - Keep your options open.

Beware of solutions, both hardware and software, that lock you into a specific and narrow technology path. A key question to ask the vendor is, "if this doesn't work out, can I use this stuff with some other solution?"

For example, if your ERP vendor wants you to buy a server running one particular brand of UNIX, make sure there are other ERP applications available for that platform. Because if you're not happy with that particular software (and if you haven't been paying attention so far, you probably won't), at least you haven't blown your entire investment.

You also want to make sure that whatever technology you buy works well with other hardware and software, and can support other applications you might find useful.

Locking yourself into one technology and platform might be the right thing to do, depending on your needs and the available solutions. But you had better be darned sure before you buy.

Killer Idea Number 12 - Shop around.

Carefully shop around. Don't look for the best price. Price is a small part of the total cost of your project. You should be looking for the best solution. Thoroughly review at least three alternatives, even if you're pretty confident in one of them. Use the other two as points of comparison.

You can also use this approach to get new ideas for ways you can improve your project, such as different software and better technology. You might find that vendor A offers a better program than vendor C. If vendor C is your preferred solution, you can suggest they try to do what vendor A is doing.

Remember we talked about checklists in Idea 2? If you haven't been able to find a checklist for your particular project, using the various proposals from your vendors will give you a start on creating your own. If one vendor recommends an overhead poly-transit and the others don't, put that item on your checklist (assuming you need an overhead poly-transit).

Killer Idea Number 13 - Watch the prices.

There are a several ways you're going to spend money on this project. As you're evaluating the price of the products, you need to keep in mind that there are more costs than just the obvious price of the software and hardware:

cost of the hardware and software (one time)
costs to install the hardware and software (one time)
training costs (continuous)
maintenance program costs (continuous)
fine-tuning costs (continuous)
consultant support costs (continuous)
internal support costs (continuous)

Some server software companies brag about how easy their software is to install. That isn't the issue. The most costly aspect of any software product isn't the installation...it's the ongoing use and management. Hopefully, you'll only have to install it once. But you'll have to use it every day. So keep in mind that those ongoing costs are going to be a big part of the "total cost of ownership."

When evaluating your costs, be careful about using the lowest bid. If they're really low, what did they miss? Why can they do it so much cheaper than the other companies? Are they cutting any corners to give you such a low price? Until you have answers to those questions, you're taking a big risk by using the lowest bidder.

On the other hand, why is the highest bidder so costly? What does she know that the others don't? Maybe she spotted a costly element in the project that is going to surprise the cheaper firms, resulting in severe unhappiness for you and them.

Even the well-known bid evaluation trick of throwing out the highest and lowest bid isn't enough. You need to figure out why those bids were high and low. In an ideal world, you'll have responses that are clustered pretty close together. Then you can make your decision based on the other factors that we've discussed, and not on price.

The same thing applies to consulting rates. Why are you getting such a good deal? Will they churn the staff assigned to your project? Are they desperate for business? Will they pull a bait-and-switch?

The point is to be very careful of the lowest prices. And look at high prices as signs of trouble.

Now you might think, "I'll buy from the lowest bidder and let him deal with the risks." This is one of the major reasons projects fail. If you BEGIN your project with an adversarial attitude, assuming that the vendor will absorb all of the risks out of the goodness of his heart, you're mistaken. You MUST take the responsibility for making the project work...which means following the steps we've discussed. Otherwise, you'll just have another failure on your hands.

Killer Idea Number 14 - Train your staff.

This is the area that's most frequently neglected. If you buy a system that is designed to make your staff more productive, you have to show them how to use it. Otherwise, instead of a powerful three-dimensional data analysis tool, they have a spreadsheet they can make lists with. Instead of a multi-media publishing package, they've got a basic word processor for writing letters. Instead of a powerful workgroup communications system, they've got email.

Follow up your investment with training, coaching and support.

Follow a methodical approach to training. Start off by introducing your staff to the system. Then they need to have that training refreshed, giving them more ideas after they've mastered the basics. Finally, make sure that, when they run into problems that weren't covered in the training (and they will - see Idea 8), they can get the problems solved quickly, without slowing them down.

The technology must facilitate their jobs and make them more productive. If they get frustrated by the technology, they'll avoid it, and then you've wasted your money, time and energy.

Help your staff get the most from your investment. If you just throw them into "sink or swim," or if you don't approach the training in a logical fashion, you'll have spent lots of money on useless software and hardware.

Killer Idea Number 15 - Beware bad advice.

We referred to this in Idea 7. Be very careful about ALL of the advice you get, but be particularly suspicious of the advice you get from non-professionals.

I had one customer who decided on a different operating system than the one that I had recommended. His "friend" was pretty knowledgeable about computers, and said that "Xware" was superior. Three months later, his network was a mess, and he'd spent a couple of extra thousand dollars on consultants to make his network work. He asked me, "You're not going to say ‹I told you so, are you?"

His friend had a PC and read lots of magazines. But he had absolutely no experience putting in networks. So my poor customer paid much more than he had budgeted, and looked bad to the rest of the executives in his small company, all because of his pal's misinformed advice.

Advice is important. But look for it from people who not only are familiar with the technology through training and study, but who are also experienced in the real world. I've run into more than a few consulting companies that recommended certain hardware and software products, but who never actually installed and supported anything. The customer was paying thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars for advice from people who read trade magazines and literature.

Experience is what counts - LOTS of experience.

Another thing to be wary of is undocumented advice from vendors. If a software vendor recommends that you buy particular products to go with their program, ask for those recommendations in writing. Make them take responsibility for their recommendations. If they won't, or can't, look for another vendor.

Technology truly can make your company more profitable and improve the lives of you and your staff. But you have to do it right. If you cut corners or take shortcuts, you'll dramatically reduce the effectiveness of the system until it becomes more of a millstone around your company's neck than a profit enhancer.

These 15 Killer Ideas come from 11 years on the buying side of the desk and over 15 years on the selling side of the desk. I think I've seen a fair chunk of the things that can go wrong in an information technology project. I've tried to summarize them with these 15 basic concepts. Follow them and you're much more likely to enjoy the fruits of your labor and investment.

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Reader Survey

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