

SOFTWARE SATISFACTION

Getting what you want (and what you need) from technology. | **Tim Carcione**



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A few years back, Mick Jagger sang, “You can’t always get what you want.” Instead he concluded, “Sometimes... you get what you need.”

While this may be true of so many situations in life, it doesn’t

have to be true when working with technology providers to meet the needs of your facilities management operation. Building the relationship between your firm and the firms that provide the technology infrastructure that you’ve come to rely on is beneficial for a number of reasons, but most importantly when you’re trying to “get what you want” from existing technologies.

On a regular basis, new features to our company’s software come across my desk in passing conversations or e-mails that typically start with a phrase like, “It would be really helpful if the software did x.” or “How hard would it be to get y?” In many cases, a solution already exists or is easily implemented through a quick change to the existing software. But from time to time, there is no quick solution or a client comes up with an idea that has never been considered.

SPEC OUT THE REQUEST

In situations like these, the requested changes must be carefully documented and turned into an actionable document that a programmer or engineer can work from. This document is often referred to as

a spec. The most effective specs are those that not only lay out a specific set of requirements for the intended project but also include a timeline, budget and other vital information.

While this may sound obvious, it cannot be underscored enough that the planning stages are the most important to executing a successful technology related project. Furthermore, if the project begins to veer from the intended result, your spec will be the document that can get the project on the right course before an incorrect final product is delivered.

THE PUZZLE PIECE SOLUTION

Another perfectly legitimate way of achieving desired results is utilizing existing components instead of undertaking the expense of creating something unique to your firm. For example, if your firm spends time manually e-mailing work requests or posting information to a Web site or intranet, there is probably a way to have this information automatically distributed or posted.

Of course this approach can have a downside: it may be difficult interfacing separate systems or technologies that were never intended to work together. In addition, going the “piecemeal” route can take longer than expected, especially if various technology providers — such as a software provider, phone company or Internet Service Provider (ISP) — will have to work together to share the (sometime secret or proprietary) aspects of their respective technologies.

GETTING WHAT YOU WANT: CASE IN POINT

Recently a client (and fellow PRSM member) Alpine Mechanical Services approached us with an idea to help stream-

line communications between its home office and mobile workforce through the use of affordable and interactive BlackBerry devices. Specifically, the firm saw great potential in sending automated e-mails of daily schedules and equipment history, eliminating the need for techs to call the office or to check an e-mail account.

To enable the e-mail notifications, Alpine approached us to design a bridge between our dispatching, service management and accounting software and its wireless devices. At the time, our product allowed for wireless access via Windows-based devices but not BlackBerry devices.

Fortunately for Alpine, the ability to generate and then distribute reports via e-mail was already built into our software. Our applications development team simply modified the software to generate reports that are sent to and displayed on a technician’s BlackBerry device.

Today, Alpine has incorporated this technology into its own proprietary tools that allow the firm to better track both work orders and techs while gathering a variety of real-time data. In addition, the relationship has gone even further: we are rolling out software that enables technicians to be completely interactive with the office via tablet PC devices.

...AND GETTING WHAT YOU NEED

While undertaking a project that aims to rework or join existing technologies can appear daunting, take heart that proper planning and communication can produce the desired benefits (as was the case with Alpine Mechanical). While it’s certainly true that you can’t always get what you want, if you work with your technology providers, it’s likely that you will. **PRSM**