

The Seven Deadly Sins of Software Selection

an article by John Tate of Tate-Bramald

A guide to the seven most common pitfalls
to avoid when choosing software for your business.

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In theory, theory, the business of selecting a new accounting system should be getting easier. Over the last few years the choice of software has contracted remarkably, with a handful - well, maybe a couple of handfuls - of vendors dominating the marketplace instead of the hundreds on offer a decade ago.

Up to a point, this is true. There are far fewer suppliers to consider and their products are much better and easier to use. But they are also becoming increasingly sophisticated, with ever more numerous and more powerful functions capable of processing more and more aspects of company administration and management.

It seems the problem facing many businessmen today is not whether the financial software on the market measures up to their requirements but whether their organisation measures up to the software. Choosing the right financial system, in other words, is apparently just as difficult as ever.

Tate-Bramald, a systems integrator, has in the past seven years helped more than a thousand organisations to select and implement new accounting systems. It has also surveyed more than ten thousand accountants and financial systems professionals about their experiences and opinions.

One of its most striking findings is that users of three out of four existing packages have had such a bad experience with them that they are determined not to go back to the same supplier again.

This appears to be a dreadful indictment of suppliers of accounting software. But I think that it really reflects the extent to which most businessmen have failed to think through what they want their software systems to achieve. And so I have written a booklet identifying the Seven Deadly Sins to which potential buyers are prone when they start looking for new accounting software.

The first sin is **lack of planning**. Many businesses have no proper deadlines, forget to place orders, do not calculate costs in advance and don't work out who is going to use the new systems. They just buy software and plug it in. It should be no surprise that it often doesn't work. The users don't know what their new system is supposed to

do, let alone how to make it happen.

The second sin is **unrealistic timescales**. Experience teaches that implementing new systems takes important steps. The process also often reveals that the old system was far from perfect and needs to be radically improved. And suddenly the whole project is hopelessly behind schedule.

Sin number three is **missing the opportunity to reorganise** - sorry, re-engineer - the business. There is far too great a tendency to computerise the old way of doing things, without taking the opportunity to improve them. Another weakness is to concentrate solely on accounting requirements, without extending the benefits of new information technology throughout the business. And too few directors consider the contribution their new software may make to growing the business. Nor do enough investigate the IT systems their competitors are using, to see if these are giving them a competitive advantage.

Sin four is **being seduced into buying products** without making sure that they do what the purchaser wants, have been tried and tested, are made by a financially viable supplier and are backed by adequate guarantees.

Sin five is **under budgeting**. This is shorthand for not making sure that the price includes everything, including training and long-term backup. This is like buying a car without wheels or an engine. This is not a very good analogy. A better one might be buying a personal pension from an independent financial adviser?

The sixth sin is not finding out whether **key employees** can use the new technology before paying for it.

And the seventh sin is **neglecting to involve** the people who are going to use the new system, skimping on training and trusting external consultants to carry out the implementation without making sure that the staff who are going to take over from these experts are tracking exactly what they are doing and can actually do it, too.

It may be an exaggeration to call these common weaknesses deadly sins, but the cost of messing up the purchase and implementation of new business systems can be fatal enough.