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11 THINGS YOU NEED TO CONSIDER (AND 1 YOU DON'T) BEFORE IMPLEMENTING A CRM SYSTEM

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"Every dollar spent in preplanning saves X dollars in deployment," Says every CRM salesperson ever. There's a reason for this: It's true. But what most companies don't realize is that increasing the value of "X" lies completely within their control. The same is also true for decreasing its value. As much as we'd all love it (yes, salespeople as well), there is no special sauce that you can pour over deployment to ensure a high ROI from your new CRM system, let alone ensure a successful implementation of it. The real secret is in your preplanning. And the good news is that most of your preplanning activities have significant value in their own right, even without a new system to install.

Preplanning has many benefits including:

- Understanding not only the 'how's', but the 'why's' of what your teams do
- Identifying process inefficiencies and breakages that are costing your company actual dollars
- Providing a list of commandments that not only can steer the implementation project, but also departmental initiatives
- Pinpointing the right time to take on a large, interdepartmental project

Of course, these activities ultimately help you target the right CRM solution as well as the customizations and automations that you need for it to be effective. Nothing can drain ROI faster than installing the wrong product and throwing more dollars and resources at it, trying to make it fit.

The recommendations that are offered here tip toward medium to large implementations. These typically involve multiple departments, integrations, and even customizations. Smaller, more straightforward projects can also benefit from time and energy being put into consideration, but they aren't as critical. If you find yourself asking "should I consider this before I take on a CRM implementation?" the answer is YES. And as you read, remember that there are guides out there to help you. Vendors who do this every day for hundreds of companies can do the heavy lifting or simply consult. This doesn't have to be a solo effort if you're concerned that you can't find the time or resources internally.

1. ASK YOURSELF IF YOU CAN COMMIT TO THE SOLUTION (AND ANSWER YOURSELF HONESTLY)

So you've identified that you need a CRM system. That's excellent. After all, the first step is acknowledging that you have a problem, right? Beyond that, though, you need to ask yourself and your fellow decision makers in the organization if you have it in your culture to commit to the solutions you install. Yes, you'll be involving stakeholders and gathering requirements. But that does not equate to the regular dedication that managers will have to exhibit in order to make the solutions work. Manager and end user daily activities will change. It's likely that new processes will be introduced. Reporting needs may shift. Are you confident that your team is unified in the new vision and their commitment to change? Or do you suspect that you may fall back into old habits and start using spreadsheets again? Even having a portion of your data in CRM and a portion in inboxes and spreadsheets is going to spell failure. It's all or nothing, and the whole team has to commit to that.

2. DECIDE WHO'S GOING TO RUN THE EFFORT

This may seem like an obvious one, but some companies overlook the accountability aspect, or they assign it to too many people which creates inconsistencies and confusion. One of the most common risks involved with too many voices at the accountability level is “scope creep” which is about as dangerous as it sounds. A month into the project you look up from your emails to find that the project has doubled in price and completion time. Keep the internal implementation team as small as the politics will allow.

This team should either have a solid understanding of the overall company structure and business tactics, or they should be allowed the time to build that understanding. They are responsible for ensuring the following considerations and activities are completed, and they will work directly with any external resource who is engaged to design, architect, and build your CRM.

Adding stakeholders is where multiple voices come into play. These stakeholders are not responsible for the overall project, but they are responsible for gathering pains and workflow feedback from even the most basic end user on their team. They are the champions of their departments. It’s a good idea to pick employees who have clout in their areas of the company since this will speed up departmental buy-in. Many organizations find it beneficial to appoint a business analyst (which we’ll get into in a moment) who is responsible for working with the stakeholders. The analyst keeps them from running away with their processes, and focuses them on current situations and needs. It’s critical at this stage to insist that all stakeholder feedback is filtered through your analyst and/or implementers, so they can identify overlaps and inconsistencies that will cause your CRM to fight itself and its users.

If you’re considering working with a partner to help manage the preplanning efforts, treat it like you would a new employee hunt. Make a list of the most important characteristics and skills that compliment your team, then interview companies with those in mind. Even though implementation vendors are skilled in all preplanning activities, it can be helpful to create a gap list. As you move through this document, jot down areas in which you believe your team is or will be lacking. If you don’t trust that your team can develop those skills or make the time internally, make sure you include those gaps as high priority when you engage a partner.

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3. BUDGET MORE THAN THE MONEY

Budget the resource hours and the right personnel. Make room for these roles to have the time and space to gather processes, work problems, assess solutions, and make recommendations. Which unfortunately means that there may be opportunity losses associated with the resulting business myopia. This is a hard one for honest salespeople to pitch, and sometimes it's even harder for some companies to hear. But if your company is committed (see point 1 above) to the project's success, then budgeting time and opportunity loss is as important to forecast and prepare for as it is the money.

Ask yourself upfront "if this takes 3 months, are we still in? 6 months? A year? How much time can we spare? How many people?" If you get into a few of the following considerations (especially when assessing a phased approach as in Point 11) and realize that you're bumping into your maximum allowable time/ effort, then you may need to reassess your requirements. It's possible you may need to rethink the project timing altogether.

4. KNOW YOUR PRECISE GOALS

Obviously, you want CRM to help your bottom line, but how do you want CRM to do that? No two businesses are exactly the same, and neither are their business tactics. It's probable (hopeful, even) you'll have more than one goal, so prioritize them based on how relevant they are to the bottom line. You want to increase sales. Ok, but what major ways do you propose to do that (events, lead nurturing, faster proposal generation, etc)? Do you want to track sales performance more closely? Do you want to integrate sales with your marketing and customer-support efforts? Do you want to increase customer satisfaction with better customer service? Are you looking for a single view of all your customer relationships for strategic planning? Do you want to collect data to support and direct marketing campaigns? Hopefully this gets your imagination going. Major areas to focus on:

- Lead management
- Marketing automation
- Sales pipeline
- Customer data

The right CRM should complement your existing systems, not redefine them.

5. UNDERSTAND AND MAP OUT YOUR EXISTING BUSINESS PROCESSES

This one really pays off, even if you never wind up implementing a CRM. To start, it's highly recommended that you appoint someone as an internal business analyst. This can be the internal project implementers themselves or as a layer between them and the stakeholders. Leaving it up to your users to know the entirety of how processes work and their implications for other departments is risky. After all, you wouldn't expect the guy ringing up your groceries to know how to process and ship milk. Your analyst should gather various processes from stakeholders and then fit them together to illustrate the entire story (workflow) of what happens, who does it, and how the work moves from one stage to another. They verify that, yes, things really do work the way that people think they do. If they don't, they can highlight these areas to be addressed before the requirements are gathered so you aren't building a system on processes that aren't helpful or effective. By examining various workflows, you'll inevitably find ways to speed things up and find breaks in efficiency.

As you build your CRM, these workflow diagrams will be the foundation of your effort. Most CRM packages come with predefined workflows for common processes. It can be tempting to just plug and play these templates—and if you're a startup, you may be able to—but the majority of companies almost always need to use their own workflows rather than stock ones. If your staff can logistically work with CRM in much the same way they did without it, you can both increase their comfort level and user adoption (see Point 10). The right CRM should complement your existing systems, not redefine them.

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6. GET INPUT FROM ALL MAJOR STAKEHOLDERS (AKA ESTABLISH BUY IN AND EARLY ADOPTION)

Especially from your sales force. The sales department will make or break most CRM efforts. If they get the feeling that CRM is something that's being done to them instead of being done for them, you're going to have a hard time getting them to use it. Since sales is the major source of data that the CRM system requires, it's extremely difficult to get any ROI out of your CRM if the sales force doesn't use it, or worse, doesn't gather information accurately. The most important things to discover from your sales team are what is working in your present processes and what is not. Identifying pain points and using CRM as the medicine will generate more support for your CRM solution. It will also keep you from adding bad processes to your requirements. Keep your focus on the problems and benefits, not the ultimate solutions themselves. Some result-focused salespeople may try to jump forward with a vision of what could be but remember that it's unlikely they know enough about CRM to play the designer at this point.

Make sure that you have input from all departments that will touch your CRM (whether they just enter two points of data or they only receive an auto-generated report once a month). That means input from top management down to customer service reps. This sounds like a lot of work, and for some companies it is. But if you budget this work now, you'll save yourself the countless, unplanned hours and dollars required to adjust the system later. And that can be a lot like building the bike while you're riding it.

7. LIST YOUR REQUIREMENTS

An obvious next step, but one that companies struggle with as they try to contain all of their various processes, issues, and plans. Remember that the admin(s) or partner you engage with will actually design the system. Your focus should be on functional requirements from a system agnostic perspective. It's not your job to translate them into system design. You need to concentrate on the elements that are necessary to achieve your precise goals (see Point 4). There are many recommendations when it comes to creating the perfect requirements document, but the highlights include:

- Standardize your language. Provide a dictionary of not only internal vocabulary definitions, but also define how you use common words and acronyms. English has many shades of grey which is great for self-expression but can lead to confusion and miscommunication when specifying particulars. Remember: assume nothing.
- Be consistent with imperatives. Something that can send builders into great debates is the use of words that rate the necessity of a requirement, like shall, must, will, and should. Be deliberate with how you use these and rank them for your builders.
- Include your rationale. Pretty much any system designer will appreciate understanding why you're listing a requirement. This will help them identify the most effective design.
- Make sure each requirement is testable. If you can't physically perform the task or see the result, then how can you know the requirement is fulfilled? It can be argued that you may not need the requirement if you can't test it.
- Use negative requirements sparingly. Pointing out what the system should not do still leaves room for a lot of possibilities. Bring in negatives only if they enhance the understanding of a positive requirement.

Confirm that each requirement you state can answer “YES” to this question: “Does this positively impact the customer/user/prospect/partner/vendor experience?”

8. KEEP THE OVERALL FOCUS ON THE 'R' in CRM

Today, CRMs are a lot more than just fancy rolodexes. You’ll likely see dazzling marketing automation, sales opportunity flows, and support queue systems. But at their core, CRMs should be the vehicle that steers your employees down the road to solid relationships. It’s easy to forget this as you muddle through the best way to automate a proposal approval process. Be careful not to build what amounts to a transactional database simply to tell you about the status of a customer, prospect, or opportunity. Instead, focus on driving behavior internally by confirming that each requirement you state can answer “YES” to this question: “Does this positively impact the customer/user/prospect/partner/vendor experience?” If you’re unsure, walk through the process from the trigger to the end result. If it appears to ultimately add more time, effort, or monetary cost to the experience, consider remapping the business process to look for inefficiencies.

In an effort to optimize all the automation possibilities, companies can find themselves turning a real relationship into a robotic process. Personal relationships between your people and the companies that you do business with cannot be overstated. It wasn’t that long ago that all business transactions were based on a person to person interaction. Be aware that sometimes an attempt to be more efficient can actually alienate the people who already liked the way you did business.

9. MAKE INTEGRATION A PRIORITY

In an effort to move fast and take baby steps at the same time, some companies skip this step altogether. Be aware that integrating your CRM with the systems that your workforce relies on is essential to its adoption. This can't be underlined enough. If CRM remains a standalone environment with siloed data, then you're ultimately asking your workers to do more work instead of increasing their efficiency. As you look at total implementation costs, it can be easy to overlook the hours of resulting research and data entry that your users will have to spend. And those hours equate to hard dollars, not to mention the employee dissatisfaction that can cause turnover. These might seem like exaggerated consequences, but they can become very real, very fast.

Start with the systems that your workers use every day, like email and document management. Work outward from there, focusing on interdepartmental scenarios like those including finance and customer service. Integration can certainly have a phased approach (see Point 11), but start somewhere, and let your users know that there is a rollout plan so they don't lose faith in the system. And don't forget mobile. You'd be surprised how much your sales team uses their mobile devices to close deals. Make sure they can continue to use it so their win rates don't drop. There are a lot of integration opportunities to consider, even for the smallest companies. This is one area where employing a partner can really maximize early user adoption while creating a realistic rollout plan.

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10. UNDERSTAND THAT USER ADOPTION BEGINS NOW (AND IT NEVER *REALLY* ENDS)

Adopting CRM is at least as much political as it is technical. To put it another way, you need an internal marketing campaign to sell CRM to your organization. Divide the messaging of your campaign to target the two most critical groups to ensure success: top management and the sales force. As you build your list of goals (see Point 4) and requirements (see Point 7), bear in mind the positive impacts for users. Add these benefits to a separate list as you work, and by the time you create your internal buy-in campaigns—voila!—your value propositions are written for you. It can be most effective when you categorize the benefits for each group, so the core messaging reaches your audience in a clear, concise manner. And remember that the first and foremost function of marketing is to repeat and repeat, and then repeat again through every stage of a campaign.

After all, you probably didn't have your phone number memorized after reading it once. It took a few glances before the numbers sunk in. The same is true with users understanding why they are using a new CRM system.

Make sure you maintain the two-way conversation. It's safe to assume that any technology you implement is one that you intend to keep for a while. Understand that it will evolve and that your workers are likely the force that incites change. Make sure that your stakeholders continue to be a part of the evolution, and that they have the opportunity to poll their departments for pains and needs. This doesn't mean you should only involve them when it's time to upgrade or bring on new features. Schedule regular checkpoints that are communicated to the entire user base, so they know they have a voice. Make sure that management compiles the feedback, creates a plan based on it, and shares it with the organization so everyone feels that the evolution is a constructive one.

You need an internal marketing campaign to sell CRM to your organization.

11. CONSIDER A PHASED DEPLOYMENT

For smaller companies, a CRM installation that includes everything from preplanning to training might only take three months. For medium to large companies, the entire scope of implementation—delivered in phases—can take years. This is not intended to scare you; it's intended to get you thinking bigger. The two major reasons that such a timeline can be beneficial are resource planning and user adoption, so take some time in preplanning to consider categorizing the overall install and parsing it out over time. It's common knowledge that predictable expenses are better than unknowns, and these include resource hours (see Point 3) as well as hard costs. Balancing that with maintaining ROI can be tricky, so work in flexibility as you plan. To stay in the game with your eyes open, ask yourself "what are the likely repercussions of failure at each phase and how can we adjust the plan moving forward in order to correct for success?" This can be a scary question to ask but starting early with hard conversations can save everyone time and pain later.

The CRM modules that produce the highest returns are usually the ones that touch the most people. Many companies want to start with the biggest, baddest portion of the system to prove a big win early on. But this is usually a mistake for two reasons. First, starting here can make it harder to build the kind of positive momentum you need to make the overall CRM project successful. Many companies see temporary stalls during the onboarding of more complicated modules. This is to be expected and worked through, but the time that this takes may cause you to lose some of the drive that the project experienced at the start. Second, the high ROI modules are the most important ones to get right. Start with easy wins by beginning with simpler modules and functionality so your users get a solid foundation using CRM. Then ramp up to more complicated processes or larger modules as they gain experience. Your workers will also appreciate getting time between phases to catch their breath and own their new processes. Once the good habits are built and reinforced, add another layer of new features or completely new processes.

One final recommendation on this point: Take a moment to ask yourself and your fellow decision makers if you have the organizational time to phase this in properly (see Point 1). This is a major commitment checkpoint that takes some honest consideration. Remember that every failed CRM implementation experienced success for a short time. If your company's time or commitment falls down during phases, it's likely that the implementation will, too. Engaging with a partner can help you recover from small breakdowns faster while staying on track, so consider your options as you try to predict various levels of success.

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12. DON'T LIMIT SCOPE TO SHORT-TERM COMPANY NEEDS

So far, we've discussed the immediate business needs, but what about the future? As you work through your current state of business with management, be sure to add a 'part 2' that focuses on the company's three- and five-year plans. This can include projected revenue, employee count, investment in specific departments, territory expansions, acquisitions, and a lot more. Consider which of these may lend themselves toward automation, system integrations, and advanced reporting. Don't solve for these things now but make note that the solution you choose needs the flexibility to contain these new requirements later. You'll wind up wasting a lot more money and energy by installing a CRM that won't grow with you or offers too many features that you will never use.

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If you made it this far, then you understand that a scalable, flexible, and empowering CRM is much more than a plug-and-play system. It must be one that provides a foundation on which you build your evolving ideal world. And creating an ideal world takes planning. If your company is ready to take on a wide-reaching solution that enables growth, multiplies relationships, deepens loyalty, and forecasts the future, then share some or all of these recommendations with your team. It may seem daunting at first but keeping all of these activities in mind as you take each step in preplanning is really the goal. Print out your top preplanning considerations in large format and keep them visible for your implementation team. Find a blank wall and grab a few packs of thumbtacks. To illustrate, not losing sight of the importance of consideration #2 as you work through consideration #6 (or vice versa) will ensure that your team doesn't spend any additional hours reworking problems. And it arms them with justifications needed to sell their decisions up and down the chain.

Good luck prepping your team for success. If you need any help or have any questions about your CRM implementation or the processes surrounding it, just reach out to **info@encorebusiness.com**.

We're happy to walk you through best practices at any time.

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