

Making good choices



Schools, in common with other organisations, depend on good information to make better business decisions. In the drive for more efficiency and effectiveness, good technology can bring huge benefits – but also huge risks. Finding the right software – and the right supplier – for your school can be a challenge. However, with the right approach to software selection, you can avoid the pitfalls and make sure you get the most from your investment. Iain Pritchard, partner at independent specialists Adapta Consulting explains.

It's not really about the software

The key to successful software selection is to realise that the software itself – what it can do and how it works – is often less important than the choice of supplier. Of course functionality, performance, scalability and many other technical considerations are important and you will need to take them all into account. You also need a strong governance framework and a business case that articulates the expected benefits. However, in the end it will be the quality of your relationship with your supplier that will determine the success - or failure - of the implementation. A good supplier can make a poor system work for you but even the best software will be ineffective if your supplier doesn't understand you or your requirements.

In fact, software selection should be seen not so much as a conventional exercise in procurement but as a test of a supplier's approach and ability to work effectively with your school. It's more like a partnership than a purchase of goods and services - and the level and style of due diligence needs to reflect that.

A more adaptive approach

Many software projects fail – not because suppliers are malevolent or go out of business during implementation or because the software doesn't actually work. The real risks are that the supplier you choose doesn't understand or value your business or that the way they work doesn't fit with your organisational culture. So, how do you avoid those risks in your software selection?

The answer is to find ways to bring your potential suppliers as close to you as possible – the opposite of most procurement processes, which keep suppliers at arms' length. You need to invite the suppliers you're really interested in to spend more time with you, talking about what you are trying to do, so that they can understand your requirements and so that you can get a sense of what it might be like to work with them.

Try to resist the temptation to outline all your functional requirements at the outset. Experience shows that what you will really need from a new management information – or any other – system only becomes clear once you have started to see it take shape. Most suppliers today welcome the invitation to build a prototype system as part of the selection process. It needn't be complex or time-consuming, though it will involve the suppliers – and you – in a bit more effort than a conventional demonstration.

These simple steps should lead to successful selection.

- Step 1. Set up an appropriate governance framework. Software selection is a project and you need an appropriate framework to manage it.
- Step 2. Establish the rationale. You need to be clear about the business benefits of the proposed investment.
- Step 3. Identify the key business processes. The main purpose of any information system is to support your business processes, so it is crucial to be able to define those.
- Step 4. Invite a (long) list of potential suppliers to say how their software might support those processes and what that might cost.
- Step 5. Shortlist the suppliers down to two (or maximum three). Invite them to come and present to you; take up references
- Step 6. Invite the shortlisted suppliers to come and spend time with the relevant teams at the school, talking through the key processes and preparing a prototype for demonstration. Try to spend as much time with the suppliers as possible so that you can check how well you work with them.
- Step 7. Finalise your choice and – at that point – sit down with the preferred supplier to agree your detailed requirements and the associated contract.

This more adaptive approach certainly involves more time and effort – but will be worth it in the end.

Adapta Consulting is an independent consultancy specialising exclusively in information systems advice and guidance to schools, universities, charities and others in the not for profit sector. See www.adaptaconsulting.co.uk for more details.