Overcoming technology resistance

Organizations that do not innovate flirt with extinction. While innovation involves the calibration of new products and services to meet the needs of customers, it also involves the adoption of new technologies within the organization. Advances in technologies can help in the redesign of business processes, the development of competitive capabilities and even the carving out of market shares or new markets. Most organizations face dire challenges in adopting new technologies. New technologies are often met with resistance. Resistance is followed by the under-utilization of the technology. This leaves the organization both vulnerable to critical disruptions in business processes and in a poor competitive position. While most organizations face challenges in technology adoption, the challenge for small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is even more dire.

SMEs often do not possess the necessary slack resources to give attention to new technologies as they are too busy making ends meet. They may also lack the necessary know-how to decide on new technologies or decipher the value to their organizations. Perhaps the biggest problem they face is resistance from employees tied to the status quo. Based on our experience, we offer 10 lessons for the SME manager to address “technology resisters”, those who oppose new technology for whatever reason, to get them on board.

Information Technology (IT) managers defining success can easily become distracted from the problem at hand by looking only at strategic-level success metrics and overlooking the immediate issue of dealing with employees who value the status quo more than helping grow the company.

These employees tend to limit themselves to an operational view of their work, caring only about fulfilling their specific responsibilities and getting their pay cheque. To reach these employees, an IT manager will have to create a success metric that supports the IT strategy on an operational level.

2. Understand why employees might resist even the best of technological innovations.
Even the best technological innovations may be rejected by employees for reasons that are not obvious. While all firms focus on increasing company value, SMEs play a more desperate game, often frantically trying to bring in money just to survive through the next quarter. To many workers, attempting to learn a new system can be a disruption that makes it more difficult to meet immediate objectives. Even if the innovation will radically help them next quarter, these employees may be far more concerned about this quarter and refuse to learn a new system. The IT manager will have to rely significantly on intuition and personal insight in order to ascertain employee motivations.

3. Ensure that the innovation is one that employees view as labour-saving.
When dealing with technology adoption problems, IT managers must consider whether the innovation reduces work for the employees, complicates work for employees, or replaces employees altogether. In either of the latter cases, employees will reject an innovation in order to preserve themselves. Understanding this is critical for IT managers looking to improve the perceptions of their co-workers regarding the innovation. When IT managers understand this distinction, they become more capable of framing their arguments in terms employees value: making work easier or more effective. By doing so, IT managers can help...
employees see a side of the new technology they may have previously overlooked.

4. Don’t rush in - prepare your approach ahead of time to best gain acceptance from resisters.
The previous suggestions all deal with one imperative element of persuading resisting employees: thinking before acting. These steps all must come before the IT manager takes action. By taking the time to do their homework, IT managers can minimize the effort required in later steps. Without planning, IT managers will be shooting in the dark, a situation in which they are not only unlikely to hit their target but risk collateral damage to business entities in the line of fire.

When dealing with technological resisters, it can be easy to begin to view them as “the enemy” or as little more than flies in the ointment. In actuality, IT managers should keep in mind that these employees are important additions to the company. While they resist the new technology, the resisters should by no means be considered incompetent. Their work adds value to the organization. The failing of IT managers to recognize this crucial insight can jade the remainder of the process of bringing the resisters on board. They are capable, intelligent people who can tell when IT is talking down to them.

5. Use social rewards to create a positive environment.
As the IT manager completes his or her assessment and creates a plan of attack, the first step should be to ensure that the environmental factors in the organization support adoption of the new innovation - a task that is deceptively simple in a small organization. Based on obtaining budget approval to procure the new equipment, top management is
probably already on IT’s side. Those who resist probably had little say in the process. What to do?

Social factors, including approval from peers, have been repeatedly shown to have a more profound impact on performance than money. Even a congratulatory word from an employee’s line manager in a staff meeting can provide enough incentive for some employees to make the jump to a new system, as can adding the employee’s adoption of the system to their annual review. Therefore, employees can increase their level of “respectability” in the SME from co-workers and management.

6. Collect feedback from technological innovators and use it.
As IT managers arrange the environmental factors, they must also consider opinion leaders. Along with technological resisters, most companies will have employees who happily embrace new technologies, rising to the challenge of mastering the systems and evaluating other innovations based on their reading and experimentation. These employees can become an IT manager’s greatest allies. Not only can these employees be seen using the new system, but they can help to support the more hesitant employees since they got on board a little more quickly.

When collecting feedback from early adopters in the company, IT must make sure they’re visibly using that information in some way. When employees are expected to provide information into a system in which the relationship between inputs and outputs is obscured, contributors tend to assume that their inputs are not being taken seriously. When collecting information from opinion leaders, an IT manager must present a clear plan for how that information will be used. By collecting feedback that will actually be used for future versions of the system, an IT manager can build significant rapport with the opinion leader, further bolstering his enthusiasm in championing the current innovation – especially if the IT manager makes it clear that the success of future versions depends on the adoption of the current version.

7. Come as a friend trying to help resisters out of the stress of coping with a new technology.
With all these factors in place, the IT manager must actually go to the resisting employee and discuss what can be done to improve the current situation. One key thing to remember when doing this, however, is to keep the approach friendly. Approaching the employee as someone who can help him or her alleviate the mounting pressure to adopt the technology is an excellent way to make adoption as positive an experience as possible. Coming as a friend also allows IT managers to ask the resisting employee for personal favours in the

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8. Timing is everything.
When establishing a solution with the employee using a cooperative, friendly approach, it is imperative to keep moving steadily toward a solution. Reaching an agreed-upon plan should not last too long nor be over too quickly. Following a predefined strategy can be effective in moving the agreement forward and gaining support from those who resist.

As IT managers pursue these strategies, they must make themselves totally involved. By reserving a short period of time to talk, sitting down, and asking insightful questions, IT managers can create an environment of trust and cooperation in little time. In establishing how much time is “enough,” IT managers should consider the workload and schedule of the resister. If it is too heavy, 20 minutes – or a discussion during lunch – may be the most time that can be spared.

Additionally, crises may occur that the resister has to take care of. If used correctly, IT managers can stand to benefit from these events. Once a crisis is identified, the IT manager should reschedule with the employee for a time after the issue is likely to be resolved. Then, when the crisis has been averted, the IT manager can meet and demonstrate how the innovation could have prevented or reduced the crisis for the employee.

9. Make the solution personal.
Rather than touting the proven efficiencies or features of the new system and discussing the many functions it can handle, IT managers should discuss some of the problems present in the old system
for the specific employee and show how the innovation or new technology alleviates those problems. By putting the issues into terms that can be internalized by the resister, the IT manager can greatly increase the likelihood of technological adoption as employees accept innovation almost solely based on how it affects them personally.

10. Reinforce behaviours - positive reinforcement for positive behaviours and negative reinforcement for negative behaviours.

After everything has been said and done, the choice ultimately rests with the resisting employee. This doesn’t mean, however, that the decision is authoritative or changeable. Even if a resisting employee says he or she will use the innovation, it is still unsure whether he or she really will. If the employee accepts, validate that decision by acknowledging it positively and providing the resources needed for the employee to follow through. Training, help desk support, and other assurances that make technology adoption easier should be in place as promised. In the case of an SME, this typically means that the IT manager must be ready to answer questions, teach, re-teach, and support any problems with the new system until its use is solidified.

Should the employee resist the new technology, his or her behaviour must be altered. Because IT managers seldom have line authority in small organizations, formal reprimands or threats of firing would be useless. Instead, the IT manager can shape behaviours by refusing to support the old system, speaking with the employee’s line manager about the business consequences of technological resistance or isolating the employee until he or she returns to the table asking for support. The ranges of choices are wide, but negative actions must be taken with care so as to avoid creating an unprofessional or hostile environment. The purpose of negative reinforcement is to create incentive for change that will bring the resister back to the table, not to administer punitive retribution for failure to comply. If negative reinforcement becomes necessary, it should be handled with the utmost care.

As with all of these guidelines, if implemented properly, IT managers can reduce the amount of time and effort spent in transitioning to a new information system, allowing the organization to maintain its focus on exploiting its strategic advantages, rather than on dealing with organizational rifts stemming from differing opinions over new technology. ■

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