6 truths about software and software implementation

By Edwin Crow
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There are two comments you're likely to hear when speaking with experienced E Source consultants. But even if you've heard them from other people before—perhaps said in slightly different ways—I consider them fundamental truths with tremendous ramifications on how utilities use, and can benefit from, software. Those statements are:

> Software doesn't solve problems. Software is a tool to solve problems.

> No one ever got fired for buying software. They got fired for not implementing it correctly.

I'm bringing this up now because a lot is changing in the utility industry. To be precise, a lot hasn't actually changed—many utilities are still looking for ways to better understand and serve their customers, automate processes to enhance productivity, and make precious financial and human resources go farther—*but the stakes have*. With equity, resiliency, reliability, and sustainability all in the spotlight, how utilities run their business is suddenly everyone's business.

Jump-start your total system transformation

Fill out this short form to start a conversation about your needs and how we can help.

Software can either (depending on whether you have a glass-is-half-empty or glass-is-half-full worldview):

- help you out of this jam; or
- help you seize this opportunity

It isn't my job to tell you which is better. It's my job to help you purchase the right software and implement it correctly so you can solve the right problems for your business and reap the benefits. Even better, implementations that benefit your utility almost always benefit your customers—and that's just good business.

Software (and implementation) truths

As someone who has served the utility industry for a long time, I feel obligated to share the following truths with you. I've learned them not exactly the *hard* way, but rather the *right* way—through experience—and I think they'll help you cut through the clutter of a noisy marketplace to make the right decisions for your utility. Here's what you need to know.

Software is a tool

I know I revealed this one already, but it's important. Software is a tool—a means to an end—not a white knight ready to slay bad business processes. The good news is that software from most vendors is generally very good and can generally deliver up to 90% of the functionality you need. But, as I also revealed earlier, the key is how you implement it, and that requires experience beyond software. It requires matching software to business need. Which brings me to truth No. 2.

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Utility, know thyself

It's no coincidence that the best software purchases and implementations are aligned with a clear understanding of the business processes and problems they're being purchased and implemented to fix. Today's technology is capable of a lot, but it can't run your business or department—that's *your* job. A good consultant can help you match the right software to the business problem you're looking to address. Whether you want to improve billing accuracy, automate or streamline your meter-to-cash cycle, or put the data generated by your AMI 1.0 or 2.0 initiative to good use, software can help, but know thyself first.

Do it by the book

You'll laugh, but as part of every software consulting engagement we enter into with a utility client, we produce a book—sometimes the size of an encyclopedia (ping me; I'll show you one)—that maps out every step and detail of a software implementation *before* the work begins. It's kind of a spectacle, but we do this so you don't *cry*, as many utilities end up doing when they turn the keys over to a large consulting shop and get an endless, multimillion-dollar project instead of a benefits-generating solution. You should know up front from your software selection and implementation partners what's happening, why it's happening, and when it will deliver results.

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"On time, on budget" sounds great, but … it's overrated

Remember the rollout of the online marketplace for the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare)? It was

delivered on time, but it didn't work and all hell broke loose (I'm saying this as a software professional, not a partisan). Great software implementations do happen—we just completed one for the Citizens Energy Group with Oracle that came in with full functionality and 10% under budget—but what your people and your customers are going to judge you on is the *effectiveness* of the software, not the go-live date. In a year, people won't remember (and likely won't even know) that your rollout was a month or two late. But they'll never let you forget it if it doesn't work as promised.

Stay flexible

In the process of knowing thyself, you'll determine (along with your selection and implementation partner) exactly what you want the new software to do and the business process or processes that will be impacted. That's great, but remember that the utility business is changing. We've entered a very dynamic period and a lot is in flux. The good news is that software is configurable. So, work with your implementation partner to focus on your immediate business needs, but also take time to look around the corner. In this respect, you may have an ally you never anticipated. Most software vendors and integrators themselves are an excellent resource for futureproofing your software investment because they invest hundreds of millions of dollars into market research. It's their job to know what's coming and make their products as useful as possible to utility clients' present and future needs.

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It's all about the data

Elon Musk recently said, "Lithium batteries are the new oil." In a similar vein, let me offer you this: "Data is the lifeblood of the current and future utility." The software you're about to invest in is going to turn on the spigot to more data about your customers and operations than you ever thought possible. Are you going to let it pour through your hands, or are you going to capture it to enrich your operations and the experience of your customers? That data, when combined with powerful new advances in data science and AI can help you get an exponential benefit from your software investment. Yes, think about the problems software is going to help you solve, but don't forget to think big—beyond your immediate pain point—because the ripples go wide.

Investing in software isn't a leap of faith

Buying software to improve your utility's operations and increase the value you provide your stakeholders shouldn't be a leap of faith. A good software selection and implementation partner—someone who knows the ropes and the relative strengths (and weaknesses) of the providers and their wares—can take the guesswork and anxiety out of your strategic investment and replace them with certainty and confidence. I know from firsthand experience just how good this can be.

Remember these six truths as you consider your next investment in software, and if you'd like to talk to me about them, share some of your own, or assess your current and future needs, please drop me a line.

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