4 Steps to Tackle the Pain of Changing Software

"Breaking up is hard to do," or so the songwriters tell us. Most of us have had the opportunity, unfortunately, to know this statement to be true.

The pain of change, whether in the status of a personal relationship, with a healthcare provider, or with a business vendor, is almost always stressful and seldom easy to do.

Some people question, "Why break up in the first place? Can the seemingly impossible differences be resolved?" The grass may not actually be greener on the other side after all.

Yet, sometimes it *is* necessary to break from old ways and old solutions—especially when the consequence of doing nothing is greater than the frustration of making the change. Plus, your payout could be huge.

This "yes/no," "change/don't change" debate can be distressing when the focus of change is business software, especially when it comes to multi-touchpoint software platforms such as a dealer management system (DMS). So, what can help you make the decision?

Ask questions to evaluate the effectiveness of your current system, including:

- What technology must my dealership consider and evaluate to become more competitive in my market?
- What solution will deliver the highest customer convenience and flexibility?
- How will a solution position my dealership to lead as an online retailer?
- How will new software position my dealership to succeed in a market that's moving toward ride-share, subscriber services, and other forms of emerging transportation that are sure to impact my business?
- What solution will best protect both business and customer data?
- Which option has the best track record for reliability, user simplicity, and cost of ownership?

A contributor to Forbes [1] recently examined similar considerations, pointing out that people spend more time on old tech, navigating admin tasks, than on engaging with customers. Their outdated systems limit their ability to respond to organizational and market needs.

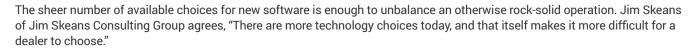So, how do you tackle the pain of changing software?

Step 1: Be Ready for Change

Change is shaking this industry to its foundations. Are you ready?

As you consider new software or a new vendor, be careful of your reasons for justifying a change. Make sure your reasons are logical and appropriate. Although, as Axia Consulting, a United Kingdom-based consulting firm notes, "The more reasons that apply, the more likely you need to change your system."[2]

Be ready for challenges. Even the most straightforward change creates uneasiness.

"Move a printer to another room and watch the dealership's productivity fall off because even a simple move like that disrupts routine for a while," software consultant Tod Kilgore of Software Team Pro says.

The sheer number of available choices for new software is enough to unbalance an otherwise rock-solid operation. Jim Skeans of Jim Skeans Consulting Group agrees, "There are more technology choices today, and that itself makes it more difficult for a dealer to choose."

Still, most challenging of all is actually switching your software. *Automotive News* makes this comparison, "For auto dealers, switching dealer management system software is like a heart transplant."[3] That's some serious change for a healthier dealership.

Changing software or providers is hard. It's true. But it doesn't really have to be as drastic as an organ transplant.

Dealers who plan for the change and solicit insight and wisdom from their peers and employees—especially those who'll be using the new software—and build team dynamics to support the endeavor will be set up for success.

A software change can be challenging but needn't create trauma.

Step 2: Consider Why You Need a Change

Robert Green, in an article titled, "When Should You Replace Old Hardware and Software?" in the computer-aided design management periodical *Cadalyst*, states that defending old technology and systems simply because users know them well or subscribe to the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" school of thought is a bogus reason to hang on to outdated systems. [4]

If your system is outdated, it's time to consider a change.

What do your circumstances tell you? Perhaps the following statements apply to you.

- Your system (including hardware) is old or your maintenance needs are escalating.
- Your software can't do what you need to grow the business and/or take advantage of evolving opportunities.
- Your other software options offer more useful functionality.
- Your solution doesn't interface seamlessly with other applications.
- Your software's interconnectivity issues cause loss of data speed and opportunity.
- Your technology cannot provide the type or depth of reporting and analytics management needs.
- Your user complaints are increasing—system is slow, rekeying is necessary, solution is unreliable, etc.
- Your vendor is struggling (or unable) to resolve issues.
- Your current system has become obsolete due to new technology.
- Your solution requires a high total cost of ownership.

If your solution requires a high total cost of ownership, it's time to consider a change.

On the other hand, there might be signs that you should maintain your current system, such as the following:

- The current system is still sufficient for current and short-term upcoming needs.
- The users are comfortable with the current technology and, after evaluating replacements, find no significant advantages to switching.
- The current software delivers a low total cost of ownership.
- The timing for change is not right.

These are all solid reasons for considering new software or keeping your current software for now. However, the decision may actually be even more black and white for you.

The top two reasons customers change suppliers, notes Revenue-IQ, is first to solve a problem that hurts the business, and second, to improve the business.[5] If these are clearly your reasons for considering change, the decision to move on to a new option may be easier to make.

When you decide to change your DMS software, your questions become, "What is the best solution?" and "Who is the best provider of that solution?" In the DMS sphere, the choices remain the "Big Two," the "Middle Three," and the "Smaller Many."

Going at this decision alone is daunting. So, don't do it. Talk to peers who have recently changed systems. Listen well to your 20 Groups. Read articles about transition with conversion examples. Meet with the vendors who offer the solutions you want and hear them out. Check out their promises.

Kilgore, Skeans, and other software consultants, such as Paul Gillrie of the Gillrie Institute and Paul MacDonald of TriMac Automotive Advisory Group, are ready to help you evaluate your options. They'll help you assess suitability, serviceability, and total cost of ownership with an impartial and objective opinion.

Step 3: Talk to Your Team

Take the temperature of your managers and software users. They're your team. To dismiss or ignore their insight and observations could lead to poor results.

The University of Alberta, in a document[6] outlining its own new software implementation, offers things to think about along these lines. It notes that an all-inclusive "communication and change management" strategy is an important part of any software change. Such a strategy ensures stakeholder participation, a sense of project ownership, and better communication about the transition to the larger audience—in your case, the whole dealership.

Skeans, a software consultant, notes that dealers have been conditioned to believe technology solves all problems and can quickly fall under vendors' marketing enticements. Asking vendors the right questions can help bring light to the reality of what their software can do. Skeans advises that dealers also ask questions of users at all levels, especially the lowest-level users, working from the warranty administrator on up.

"When you ask the staff, which many dealers don't, they'll tell you their pain points with whatever system is being considered," Skeans said. So, ask them. They may shine light on ways to make their processes more efficient and point out functionality that hurts their workflow.

When you do decide to make a change, remember that with all change comes pushback.

"I remind dealers that the first six months of any conversion are going to be a failure," Skeans stated. "It's during this critical time that key users will report to anyone who will listen that, 'The new DMS doesn't work,' or that 'It's no good,' or 'The old system was better,' or variations of the same complaint," he explains. "The leaders of the dealership must realize such complaining is typical during any conversion and that it is temporary."

Step 4: Know the Roadblocks

Other business leaders have made significant changes before, so let's learn from their experiences. In her *Houston Chronicle* article, "Barriers & Challenges to Change Implementation," former software tester Shelley Frost writes about typical roadblocks.[7] She states that, "Anticipating these roadblocks helps you avoid them before they become major issues in the change implementation."

Frost advises leaders to avoid these following roadblocks:

- **Poor Planning (or Failure to Plan)** – Your vendor, who has helped hundreds if not thousands of dealers make a similar change, should have a logical transitional plan for you to follow. Do so. However, don't neglect to apply that plan to *your* situation.

  - How will the change ripple through *your* organization?
  - Who are the individuals *you* want responsible for handling various functions?
  - What is *your* timeline for implementation, testing, training, and additional roll-out, support, and follow-up elements?

- **Lack of Consensus** – Team building and team acceptance are critical. While the decision to change a software tool or vendor is ultimately the dealer's, department managers must also help everyone see the big picture, understand their role in it, and discover, with clarity, the W.I.I.F.M. (What's In It For Me?) advantages.

- **Miscommunication** – The best advice here is to communicate, communicate, and communicate again. "The feeling of uncertainty when management doesn't communicate disrupts work and makes employees feel as if they aren't a part of the decision. Keep employees updated regularly," Frost says.

- **Pushback** – Expect criticism. Listen and adjust where needed, but don't let pushback dissuade your overall objective.

Software consultant Tod Kilgore seems to agree with these cautions. Regarding planning and transition, he advises, "The manager is ultimately responsible for outcomes, good or bad, and needs to direct the change. The transition timetable shouldn't be vendor driven, but driven by the decision makers."

He also agrees that consensus, communication, and team effort are important factors in effective change. Just be careful of timing.

"Software system users tend to be task oriented and evaluate software changes based on whether it's a better option or product for them," he explains. "It's as you work through these difficulties of change you become a team."

He recommends that you, "Sit with everyone involved and, as you might at a family dinner, discuss mutual concerns and listen to input."

"Managers," Kilgore directs, "should be collecting insight about every angle of the change," and informing the dealer. "The dealer doesn't want to be the last person in the room not knowing how the change is going."

"A software change is a group effort," Kilgore reiterates, "with everyone on the team providing feedback." And as many wise people have counseled before, Kilgore advises, "Be prepared or prepare to fail."

So, Are You Ready for Change?

Change is difficult for most of us mere humans and sometimes even painful. A software change doesn't have to be traumatic however. If you prepare well for the change with a thorough plan and a team that's on board for the process, the positive results from a well-thought-out change can be abundant and revitalizing to your employees and business.

Autosoft makes switching easier with a clear onboarding plan, in-depth training with your install, and extensive support throughout the process. Autosoft's industry leading platform is both easy to learn and easy to use with intuitive navigation, efficient workflows, and seamless integrations. If you're ready to make a change, give us a call.

1   Chris Cancialosi, "Outdated Tech is Costing You More than You Think," *Forbes*, August 16, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriscancialosi/2017/08/16/outdated-tech-is-costing-you-more-than-you-think/#711feddf1099.

2   "Why change your present system?" AXIA Consulting, Ltd., http://www.axia-consulting.co.uk/html/why_change.html.

3   David Barkholz, "Inside 'Mission Impossible': A DMS change," Automotive News, January 13, 2014, http://www.autonews.com/article/20140113/RETAIL/301139967/inside-mission-impossible:-a-dms-change.

4   Robert Green, "When Should You Replace Old Hardware and Software?" Cadalyst, November 14, 2012, http://www.cadalyst.com/management/when-should-you-replace-old-hardware-and-software-15196?print=1.

5   Chris Arlen, "Buying Motivation: 4 Reasons Customers Change Suppliers," Revenue-IQ (blog), http://www.revenue-iq.com/2011/08/buyer-motivation-4-reasons-customers-change-suppliers.

6   University of Alberta, "External Relations: Advancement Software Implementation Communications and Change Management Strategy," http://www.supportingadvancement.com/potpourri/branding_adv_services/ua_communications_strategy.pdf.

7   Shelley Frost, "Barriers & Challenges to Change Implementation," Small Business - Chron.com, June 29, 2018, http://smallbusiness.chron.com/barriers-challenges-change-implementation-30842.html.

Autosoft makes automotive retail effortless. Its dealer management platform and cloud-based applications put the car buyer first by creating a frictionless experience. The platform includes integrated vehicle inventory, websites, marketing, sales, F&I, service, parts and accounting solutions that optimize dealership productivity, customer experience and profitability. Autosoft serves more than 2,000 dealer customers, is the DrivingSales All-Time Most Recommended DMS, integrates with more than 220 technology partners and holds 36 OEM certifications. To learn more about Autosoft visit www.autosoftdms.com.