TOUGH ANALYSIS

Simon Farthing, commercial and marketing director, LexisNexis Enterprise Solutions, says accurate problem analysis ensures technology adoption down the line

Several years ago, after moving from practicing law to trying to innovate it, I was sat in a requirement gathering session with end users in my firm. We were to define a departmental solution, to hear their challenges and opportunities. I was excited, I knew we could help, we just needed to know where we could have most impact. The problem was that the person I really needed to get on board was glued to his Blackberry. It wasn't his fault, he, like most busy lawyers had a day job that needed doing. Due to his lack of engagement he actually found change happening to him rather than being an agent of that change.

For technology adoption to succeed, experience shows key stakeholders cannot abdicate decision making at any level, deliberately or inadvertently. No one can know their business as well as they do, not even the consultants they employ to help them with technology selection.

A BUNKER MENTALITY

Today we're increasingly seeing more practice representation in IT projects, but often the approach is to design a 'perfect' solution and lock its development until the 'big reveal' to the firm. In the interim, business and user requirements will either have changed or they weren't accurately defined, so the resulting solution doesn't hit the mark. It's akin to a bunker mentality – even with the best designed systems in the bunker, the longer you are shut in there the further the solution moves away from the problem, particularly when the world is changing as fast as it is today.

Adopting a continuous development approach to application creation is more productive. Having 'eyesight' over a project to ensure that the application is indeed progressing towards a solution to the business problem is key. It helps stakeholders to course-correct, following visibility of a previously unrecognised problem, inaccurate problem description, misinterpretation or even a fresh market opportunity.

'SOLUTIONISING' THE PROBLEM

The tendency is to 'solutionise' the problem. As Henry Ford once allegedly said: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."
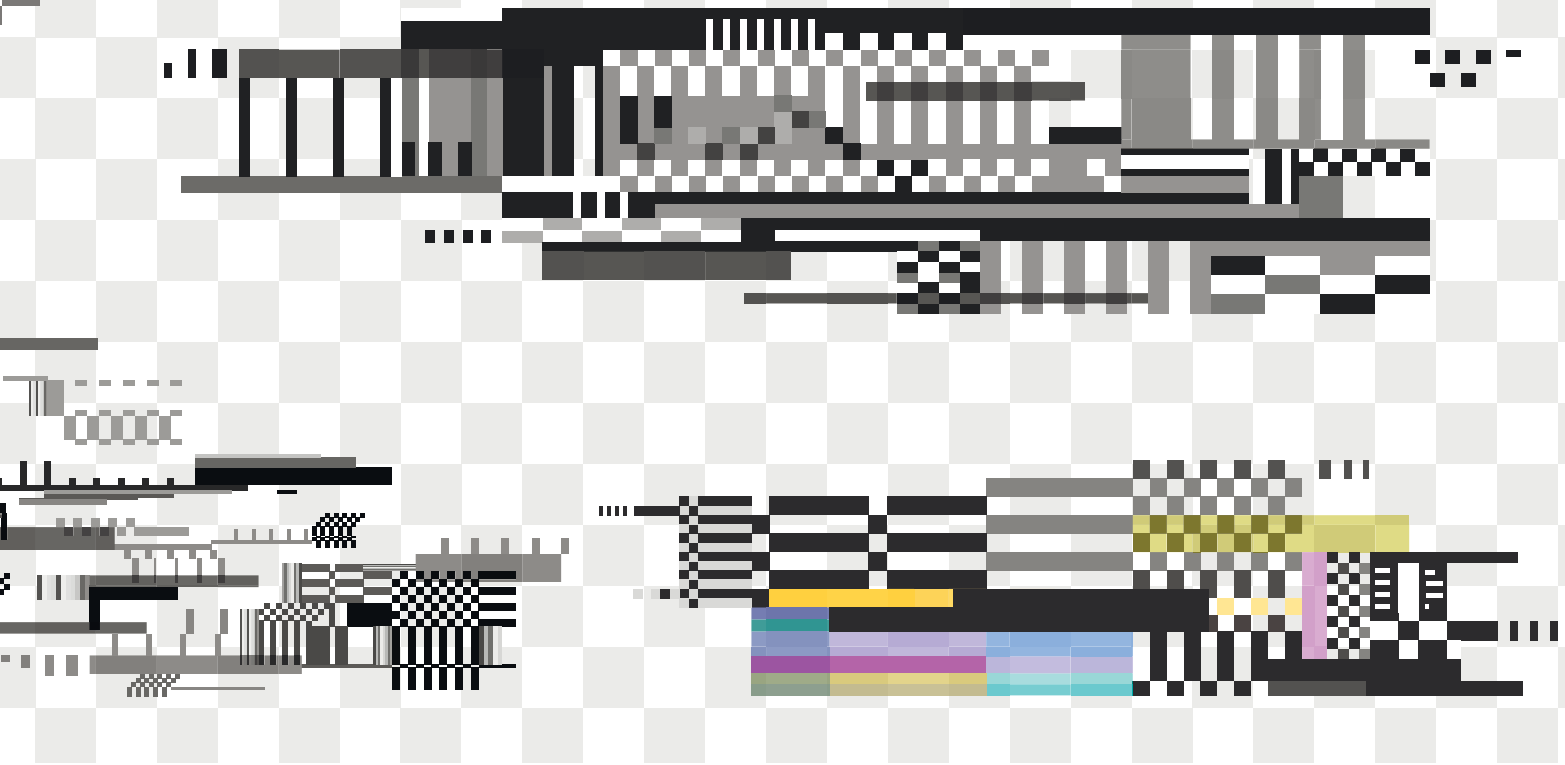
For example, case management system users in a conveyancing firm may describe their problem as 'we find it hard to onboard new clients'. The firm's typical solution to the problem? 'We need a new onboarding tool'. In effect, the firm is defining the solution without analysing the issue. So, they buy a new system that they didn't need, which then ends up as another 'failed' project due to a lack of adoption because it didn't address the problem.

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Problem analysis helps to understand the issues, identify the gaps in processes and knowledge, and evaluate existing technology for quick, cost-efficient solutions.

Say, the same conveyancing firm finds that getting clients to sign up is difficult because there's a time-consuming regulatory process that needs to be followed. Clients find it frustrating – it requires numerous forms to be filled and occasionally demands that they come into the office. This causes delays. So, the requirement isn't for a new onboarding solution, but making changes to the current processes in the case management system to remove the regulatory hindrances while making signing up easier for clients and risk-free for lawyers.

OVERLOOKING CHANGE

There's a level of operation that a firm becomes content with, alongside an aspiration to do better – hence the motivation to invest in technology. But, firms rarely pay attention to change management to close the gap between expectation and reality.

For a new solution, firms often ascertain the time it'll take to develop and implement the application but fail to consider the impact on the business in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and profitability during the transition period, until the solution is well adopted.

This is a major cause of an expectation gap and disappointment, which in turn gets attributed as a 'failed' technology. Because users aren't invested in the new solution, despite it being better suited to their current needs, they automatically resort to the old processes and technology – even if substandard – because it's familiar.

Change has a price and consequence – it must be budgeted for in the form of user involvement from the start, regular communication, and well thought through, continuous training.

ACQUISITION INTROSPECTION

Firms oscillate between investing in shiny new systems that 'solve' a business issue and spending no pennies at all on technology. Both approaches can result in failed technology projects. A more astute approach is to see if you can leverage and optimise the existing toolset first. Firms will frequently find that the solution already exists, it's a matter of applying the toolset to the problem. If it doesn't, you know that technology spend is justified.

To this end, the role of technology providers – for example, that of a supplier or a tech partner – has a huge bearing. By investing in technology through a partnership approach, they'll take a long-term view of your implementation, enabling you to implement a solution that is suitable for the business immediately, and for the foreseeable future. Client advice and consultation are core elements of their offering. These services can be the difference between technology success and failure. **LPM**