Integration and implementation of technology in a real estate organisation

Without doubt, technology has revolutionised the operation of real estate business over the past few years allowing individual salespeople, agencies and whole groups to become more profitable. Quite simply, e-marketing increases the number of people a salesperson (and therefore sales teams) can reasonably stay in touch with, while also decreasing the costs of doing so.

Yet the integration of technology into our business has not, in general, been smooth. It has tended to be a "consumer led" revolution with the industry feeling the need to "catch up" more often than not.

Below we review the lessons that have been learnt to date and solutions to everyday implementation issues. (At the end of this section is an example database integration plan)

1. Be on the 'leading edge' not the 'bleeding edge'

   While there is a significant marketing advantage granted to those who integrate technology into their business before their direct competitors, there is such a thing as being "too fast off the mark". In Australasia, we are less vulnerable to this than the USA, where most of the new products and services are released and taken up first. In a large number of cases, providing you have the advice of someone who is informed in that market, you can avoid a lot of the potential mistakes and introduce proven strategies and technologies while still being ahead of the competition.

2. Involve every level of the business in the integration

   To maximise the effectiveness of any new idea or system, everyone in the organisation needs to be working in the same direction. In a technology sense this is somewhat harder than what it seems because people will need to develop in different ways according to who they are in the team.

   Let's look at the differences.
   Organisational leaders need to fully understand the direction that technology is taking them and the 'why' of any move. They need to keep an eye on the cost-effectiveness and speed of integration. Put simply, they need the 'big picture' and some understanding of the degree of difficulty of each of the tasks that need to be done in order to manage the process well. In addition, it is wise that they know how to use some of the technology to improve their personal efficiency and effectiveness.

   Salespeople need good reasons to change and need at least some basic knowledge of the technology so that they are not 'left out in the cold' but most importantly they need to understand what to focus on, and practical skills to overcome new issues.

   As an example of this, when a real estate organisation becomes e-business focused, they discover the most important piece of information they can have on a customer is their email address. The new problems that are created for them are simple to overcome, but include questions salespeople will need the answers to. "How do I ask for an email address so that I am likely to get it?"

and “How to I cover the situation where I think they have given me an incorrect address?” “When is the best time to ask for an email address?” and “How much other information should I collect at the same time?”

As previously stated these are easy problems to overcome but if salespeople are not adequately supported through the process they can ‘give up’ before they get results and may even become a negative influence on others.

Sles support people also need to be fully prepared for integration of technology. Most sales support people are likely to already have reasonable ‘techno’ skills but if they are not included in the “how” and “why” of changes then a very valuable method of integration will be lost. For example, salespeople quickly realise the potential of an email notification service for buyers but frequently lack the skills to create the necessary database and send grouped email. Sales support people are likely to be able to pick up the technical skills very quickly and become and in-house teaching and implementation resource.

3. Focus on your core business, understand technology but continue to play your proper role (Leaders lead, salespeople sell, “techie’s” play with computers)

   In the process of integrating technology it is vital not to distract people for their main roles. In order to do this, strict time limits need to be placed (minimum and maximum) on working with technology.

4. Focus on making every repeated task easier (systematise)

   Technology can greatly improve our efficiency and effectiveness if we allow it to. Focus on the creation of standard methods of operation can significantly increase the quality and quality of contact we can have with a consumer. “Activity Schedules or Plans” within databases allow the creation of a standard series of actions that can be quickly applied to manage that prospect. The central concept here is, it is not what you put into your database that makes you money but what you do with that contact that makes you the money. Activity plans allow you to pre-plan what that contact should be and quickly and efficiently manage that prospect in the manner that you have chosen.

5. Don’t be ‘held to ransom’ by experts

   You need enough in-house knowledge so that you do not have to constantly call in expensive technology people. Hire young computer-savvy people who can grow with your business. You can provide the real estate knowledge and business skill, they can provide the knowledge and confidence to operate in a high-tech environment.

6. Remember that experience is an expensive teacher

   Most of the answers are already known to the challenges you will face in implementing technology into your business. Experience, as they say, is an excellent teacher…if you can afford the tuition fees. Or make life simple and get some expert help in the beginning to help put you on the right path.

   Example Database Integration

   It is not possible to integrate a real-estate specific database program into an existing real estate business in a single step without creating unnecessary hardship for all concerned. A step-by-step approach is recommended.

   A specific order of events have been chosen because experience has shown this is the way it works best in most operational real estate offices. The order can be changed, but it is not recommended that you do so without first thinking through the consequences.

For example, I have recommended that you start with appraisals. The reason I believe this is the best place to start is that if you perfect the 'follow-up' of this part of the business, you will have a dramatic positive impact on your listings. This helps everyone involved in the integration of the database (especially the salespeople involved) in that there is an almost immediate positive impact in doing what is required to integrate the database. Should you decide to start instead with buyers, it is likely to be a time-consuming exercise with little result in the short term. It will also mean that a lot of other data will have to be added before you can take advantage of the buyer data in the system. That is, buyer information will be of little use until listings have been added, as there will be no cross-matching ability in the system. It would be too lengthy here to justify the order of each – please just be cautious before you change it.

I recommend that management focus on the following during the implementation phase:

- Focus on what to get out, not what to get in. You do not make money by owning data, you make money by the relationships that develop as a result to the contact you make out of your database. Those closely involved in the implementation tend to focus on getting the data in. That is the correct focus for them, but it is essential that management keeps it's focus on what material is going out to the database
- Complete each step well, rather than rushing ("Make haste slowly"). Time invested initially in developing the 'right' letters, action plans, auto-complete drop-down boxes and the like are initially time consuming but will repay massive dividends in decreasing future data entry time and in making the database effective. A well set-up database will largely automate your operational activities within the office, and that is far too important to rush.
- Develop a '"from this day forward" approach. You will overwhelmed with data unless you decide --at least temporarily-- to make a break with the past. This will take great strength and support to make a reality.

Let's look at an example.
AA Realty has been in existence for a long time in the local area and as a consequence, has a lot of 'past sales' information. This information is currently not being used very well. Occasional contact is made by some salespeople but not by others. AA Realty correctly assumes they are missing business as a result of not putting this data into their new database system. Unfortunately, they decide that this is their top priority, not a later priority. They spend a good deal of time and money getting this data on the system and decide to start at sales made in 1980. At the end of some weeks the first mail goes out. Sadly, a large percentage of it is returned with 'unknown' at address on it. Everyone is somewhat demoralised at the apparent waste of effort and as a result co-operation from everyone drops off. As you will see in the exercise below, past sales data is important, but the correct approach is: 'from this day forward' then catch up with the past. Select the date from which 'no matter what', data will be entered and after sales follow-up will occur. No exceptions. When this is operational, work backwards from that time such that people who have settled a sale with your business will have contact before someone who has not done business with you for 20 years. This approach is much more likely to be successful and is a better allocation of resources.

Management will also need to focus on 'from this day forward' at other times in the implementation process. This is likely to occur in the duplication of systems. Let me explain. Salespeople in many offices use a paper diary to record buyer enquiry. When a new system is being introduced, there would be a date from which buyer data can be entered into the system (as all the action plans are in place). It is usual that during this time he existing manual system would continue to be used by those who choose to. The reality is that some will never give over the data unless they are strongly encouraged to, and they will need a 'from this day forward' approach so that all buyer data must be entered into the system, no matter what.

It should also be noted that I have assumed there will be centralised data entry for this exercise. This is not specifically recommended or not recommended, it simply means that some of the language in the action plan needs to be altered should this not be the case.

At the end of this list – please also read carefully the section 'A Word To The Wise'.

Phase	Data	Steps/Comments
1	Appraisal	1. Review / Create Action plans for appraisals. I suggest a total of 6 plans – 3 mail, 3 email based a. Will list in the next 60 days b. List in 60 – 120 days c. 120 + days 2. Educate the team on how the action plans work and how to access data they need 3. Past 8 weeks of appraisal data entered and action plans commenced 4. All new appraisal data entered and action plans commenced ("…from this day forward") 5. Review implementation of appraisal process and adjust as necessary before moving to next stage
2	Sales	1. Review / Create Action plans for Sales through to Settlement period 2. Enter all sales data that occur after the selected date 3. Educate the team on how the action plans work and how to access data they need – access to this data may be inappropriate in some organisations, but it is important that everyone know what is happening 4. Commence sales action plans 5. Review implementation of process and adjust as necessary
3	Settlements	1. Review / Create Action plans for after-sales follow-up (Settlement +) 2. Commence action plans (data will already be in the system from Stage 2) 3. Review implementation of process and adjust as necessary

		4. DO not at this stage add past sales data (we will get to that in a later stage)
4	Listings	1. Review / Create Action plans for listing types 2. Review and adjust standard ‘drop-down’ lists (for example – feature lists for properties should be modified to reflect those most commonly found in your area and those not applicable should be deleted). This step will speed data entry significantly 3. Enter all listing data for existing listings, then all listings that occur after the selected date 4. Educate the team on how the action plans work and how to access data they need 5. Commence listing action plans (where appropriate) 6. Review implementation of process and adjust as necessary
5	Buyers	1. Review / Create Action plans for buyer types 2. Review and adjust standard ‘drop-down’ lists 3. Enter all buyer data new to the system as of the selected date 4. Educate the team on how the action plans work and how to access data they need 5. Enter existing buyer data (those who were buyers before the selected date) 6. Commence buyer action plans (where appropriate) 7. Educate on the use of buyer matching searches (buyers to listings and listing to buyers) 8. Review implementation of process
6	Circle of influence	1. Identify categories of contacts

	contacts	2. Develop action plans where appropriate 3. Educate the team on how the action plans work and how to access data they need 4. Enter data 5. Commence action plans 6. Review
7	Past business	1. Identify categories of contacts 2. Develop action plans where appropriate 3. Educate the team on how the action plans work and how to access data 4. Enter data 5. Commence action plans 6. Review

A Word To The Wise

1. **Where standard action plans come with your system (e.g. Top Producer, Agent 2000) do NOT erase or adjust the original plan! Copy the plan. Ensure that it has a name similar to the original eg "High-Touch 30 day appraisal follow-up – Email" could become "High-Touch Custom 30 day appraisal follow-up – Email". Copying the plan will mean that you can always refer back to it later if you like.**
2. **Rule 1 (above) should also apply to all letters – copy the original and adjust it, don't erase or adjust the original or you may be VERY sorry!**
3. **If you have existing follow-up plans in the database program you are working with, do not try to re-write the whole of the long plans in a single hit. For example, where a ten-year plan exists, it is appropriate that you complete say 1 year of activities. It is important that you add an activity (& therefore appropriate diary note) to continue to develop the plan before expiry of the year – say perhaps around 9 months time. Then repeat the exercise each year until you have all 10 years worth of plan customised.**