

[Safety+Health](#) > 2 11 Workplace Solutions Navigating decisions about safety software

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Navigating decisions about safety software

I frequently find that in order to take advantage of the software that is available on the market, I have to change the way I run my safety program and do it "their way." Is it worth it?

Answered by Ben Archibald, product team leader, Remedy Interactive Inc., Sausalito, CA.

Most people have, at one time or another, imagined a piece of software that could solve a problem they are up against; improve a business process; or automate a function that is error-prone, messy or just downright tedious. There are two possible outcomes to such a vision:

1. You've dreamt up brilliant new software and will become the next Bill Gates (call me).
2. You find existing software that solves for similar, but not identical, needs.

Unfortunately for us all, common experience more typically results in the latter. In this case, the available safety solutions might push a form of dogma and methodology that you do not subscribe to, or ask that you change every detail of the way you operate your safety program. At their worst, many safety technologies propose that "their way" can replace your own expertise and experience.

On the flip side, many aspects of safety and safety management can benefit from using software. Journals and conferences are filled with success stories of incredible improvements to safety performance through the adoption of new technologies. Should you jump in? How much should you be willing to change in order to get on board?

These are hard questions and they cannot be avoided. Every safety professional will use software in his or her career, and many will be involved in the evaluation and purchase of software. Here are three suggestions to help you navigate decisions about implementing software for your safety program:

Understand your current processes

The first time my own organization tried to change the way we performed a business process, we underestimated the scope of that change because we did not really understand how we had previously done things. Software selection, especially when used for complex safety processes, often is about formalizing processes that were previously performed in ad hoc fashion. A deep understanding of how your organization currently gets things done provides insight into how much change would occur with the implementation of new software – insight that will help you decide whether or not the benefits of the software would be worth the change involved.

Question the vendor, question yourself

Just because a vendor does something one way to create significant value for other customers does not mean that it will create the same value for your organization. Conversely, the experience a software vendor has is based on their experience with numerous customers who may have once been in a situation similar to your own. Be open to learning from your vendor, and insist that your vendor is open to learning from you.

Look for vendors embracing continual improvement and business process management

Vendors who have built their products based on these concepts likely will have modern technology platforms, are more likely to view software as enabling and improving (not replacing) the expertise of you and your safety team, and will have built adaptable software with the expectation of making improvements over time and configuring their software to meet the unique needs of your organization.

Editor's Note: These articles represent the independent views of the authors and should not be construed as National Safety Council endorsements.

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