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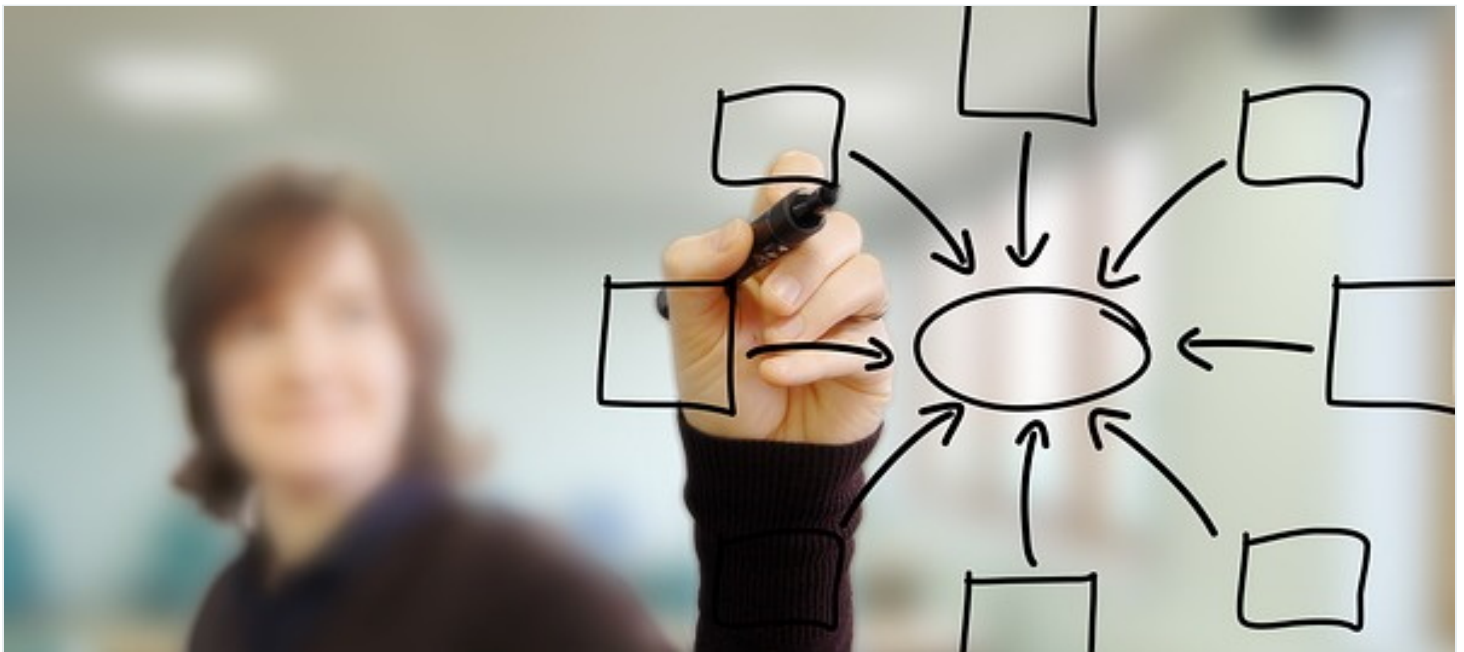
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FIRM MANAGEMENT

4 Keys to Successful Technology Planning

Technology is ingrained in virtually everything accountants do to run their firms and serve their clients. To take advantage of opportunities and position your firm for long-term growth, you need a good technology plan. When most of the firm is focused...

Amanda Wilkie • Mar. 08, 2021



Technology is ingrained in virtually everything accountants do to run their firms and serve their clients. To take advantage of opportunities and position your firm for long-term growth, you need a good technology plan. When most of the firm is focused on busy season, it's an excellent time to focus on technology planning.

IT's priority during busy season is to keep all of the firm's existing technology running smoothly, handle issues quickly and prevent downtime. But beyond those immediate needs, the IT team often has time to plan for upcoming projects to ensure they can hit the ground running after April 15.

Manage expectations

One of the problems IT teams run into with their technology plan is that many firm leaders and administrators don't truly understand how different IT projects may be intertwined and how long they'll take.

For example, say a firm wants to change its practice management system, moving from an on-premises solution to the cloud. Firm leaders may not realize how much planning and time a project like that takes. Your IT team needs to:

- Vet available options and make a selection
- Create a full inventory of all of the firm's data assets that will be impacted and scrub that data to ensure a clean move
- Understand how other applications will be affected by the new system
- Onboard, migrate and train employees to use the new system
- Work with the old and new solution providers to address data mitigation efforts
- Ensure you have measures in place to secure data from loss or errors during the migration

That's likely not something you can decide to do in July and have up and running before the fall deadlines. However, it is possible to meet that deadline if the IT team can start the planning process now and be ready to kick it off in earnest once busy season is over.

Prioritize projects

Another hurdle to effective technology planning is prioritizing projects. We use what we call the "puppy analogy" to talk about technology planning. You have your small dogs, medium-sized dogs and Great Danes. If you have Great Danes, you can walk one at a time without issue. If you have small dogs, you can walk a few at a time.

However, anyone who's brought a puppy home knows that even small dogs can be a lot to manage when they're puppies. Every project – large or small – has its puppy stage, and some puppy stages are longer than others. Data manipulation, clean up and transfer are the puppy stage of a project, and they take a lot longer. Any technology project that impacts the firm likewise has a longer puppy stage. So it

helps to be realistic about what you can accomplish at any given time and space out those Great Danes and puppy stages.

Seek outside help

So how do you plan for and prioritize those projects? It helps to have a technology assessment from an outside facilitator.

Something we often hear from firms is that they have trouble building consensus among the leadership team. Different people have their own agendas or are only thinking only about their own department, which hinders progress. When you bring in an outside facilitator, you have a neutral third party leading visionary discussions with the team. This encourages active participation and improves buy-in to develop one core vision.

A technology assessment can:

- Educate partners on technology trends in the profession and the required level of investment for different projects
- Recommend strategies to increase success and help make your firm future-ready
- Identify significant technology objectives for short-term and long term action
- Ensure your technology plan support the firm's overall strategic plan
- Help you evaluate applications and integrations
- Assess your IT governance, workload and staffing model
- Review current technology infrastructure and processes

Create a 3-year plan

A technology assessment led by an outside facilitator can also ensure that you make a plan, complete with timelines and responsibilities. This tends to increase commitment to projects. It also ensures that when someone insists we need to add a new project to the list, the IT department can say, "Great, which existing project in the plan do you want to scrap?"

We've worked with firms who tried to conduct their own technology assessment and roadmap, only to find that dates keep shifting and deadlines aren't met, which pushes projects past the ideal timeline for proper planning and execution. This can throw the overall roadmap off and decrease success.

Creating a three-year plan ensures:

- You give your team adequate time for project planning

- You identify potential roadblocks and determine strategies for overcoming challenges

Once again, an outside facilitator can help by holding people accountable for meeting deadlines and providing change management strategies to increase buy-in across the firm.

So what IT initiatives do you want to do this year, next year and beyond? Now is the time to start planning and prioritizing those projects. Priorities may change, but you can revisit your plan quarterly to ensure you're on track and make adjustments. Remember, this doesn't have to be a do-it-yourself project, and you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Seek outside expertise to bring in some much-needed perspective and increase commitment.

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Amanda Wilkie is a consultant at [Boomer Consulting, Inc.](#), with two decades of technology experience, and has spent 13 years driving change and process improvement through innovative technology solutions for public accounting firms. Amanda is a recognized expert in the profession as a Lean Six Sigma Green Belt and Certified Blockchain Solution Architect. She regularly speaks and writes on process improvement, blockchain and cryptocurrency and their impact on the profession.

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