

## Ten Steps to Strategic Technology

### Providing Customer Value through Innovative Planning

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**A**V, IT and Telecom equipment has rapidly become a commodity, available through open bid, office supply superstores, and even EBay™ auctions. For the most part, AV/IT/Telecom design and installation services are indistinguishable from provider to provider the inexperienced customer. Many client requests for qualifications and/or proposals for projects have become virtual cattle-calls, where the qualified and the marginal compete on equal footing. In this kind of marketplace, is there an effective way to compete? Answering the following questions is a start.

What distinguishes one technology provider from another? How can the design consultant compete and contrast specialized acumen from that of a lesser qualified, but similar appearing competitor? How does the system integrator move beyond competing on price alone? When does the age old argument of design v. design/build become moot?

One proven way to address all of these critical issues is to provide strategic value. For most client companies and organizations, keeping current with the information and media technology represents an ongoing and significant expenditure. Communication technology offers an unprecedented opportunity to the contemporary business for gaining and maintaining competitive advantage. For the system design consultant and integrator this presents a similar opportunity to offer and provide resources that leverage communication technology in new ways to improve the effectiveness of the client's business model.

Establishing differentiation in the mind of a potential client comes from understanding the clients' real and long-term (not imagined or transitory) needs, and helping them plan strategically how to implement communication technology that helps them in their own competitive marketplace. By providing services that focus less on short-term sales, but instead seek to position the technology firm as a long-term service and solution provider, enables equally long-term rewards.

Designing and implementing technology is not a discrete one-time project; it is an ongoing process. An effective technology plan is built on and supports the client's overall mission, business goals and objectives. Too often, disparate systems are implemented through separate resources, resulting in information that becomes fragmented, inaccurate or inaccessible. While each client company's technology plan will ultimately reflect their circumstances and culture, this need is the foundation of providing effective consultative input value.

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The need for effective communication is the basis for the following 10 steps to becoming a valuable technology resource to your clients.

## 1. Understand the Client's Mission and Business Strategy

Why, and for whom, does the client's company exist? Understanding their overriding business objectives is fundamental to developing technology strategies that support the company's goals. This requires input from a number of different constituencies, ranging from executives to support staff, who must agree on the purpose any technology and what communication can accomplish is key to building a successful system. Learning to ask, listen and share knowledge is the critical skill to success in this initial effort.

## 2. Document Current Systems and Work Processes

Technology management support requires an understanding of how technology currently functions. This sometimes raises difficult questions, when "owners" don't acknowledge weaknesses, failures, or ineffective current implementations. However, working with operations management staff, and defining communication processes, provides insight into opportunities to leverage new systems implementations. This includes cross-department relationships and inter-dependencies (for information), as well as data collection, flow, and information transformation for both internal and external uses.

Beyond process, it is equally important to document hardware and software, network configuration (data topology, structured cable plan, servers and workstations, as well as media production and presentation support technologies – the communication nodes on the network).

This is a critical step. Time spent to inventory and document technology configuration can reduce time in later phases and ultimately in the implementation and maintenance of new systems. This is also the stage best completed by a consultative resource; an opportunity for the design consultant or system integrator.

## 3. Evaluate Effectiveness of Current Systems

How well do current systems support business goals? Look for challenges, bottlenecks, and system failures. Document issues based on facts, not supposition. Do current systems allow business to get done, or are work-arounds commonplace? Are configurations optimized to meet the business processes and communication structure and hierarchies?

## 4. Determine New Requirements

Requirements for new systems generally flow naturally from the evaluation in steps 1 and 2. By starting with a high-level view, recommendations for systems to support timely, responsive and efficient access to data without delays or system traffic snarls, become immediately evident. At this stage, "blue sky" vision can establish long-term strategies that will be refined in subsequent steps.

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## 5. Articulate Media/Information Strategy

Defining a new strategy based on “open systems” architecture and proven, non-proprietary hardware, allows the client’s technology systems to both grow and migrate at the least cost in the future. Systems that are easily modeled, replicated, supported provide the best long-term value. This also reinforces in the clients view that your motivation is not based on bias toward specific vendors.

## 6. Define the Technology System Solution

Prepare a cost-benefit model comparing tangible and intangible benefits for the hardware, software and infrastructure options. Provide a comparison of different vendors and manufacturers, showing what components they support, services they provide, platforms they support and cost options. Include supplemental issues like maintenance programs, technical support and training that each vendor provides. To integrate your services with the overall technology strategy and support the client’s needs, identify which of these support services your firm can provide on an on-going basis.

## 7. Design Technology System Infrastructure

As each step in the strategic technology planning process becomes more specific, it becomes easier to identify physical infrastructure requirements. This provides the client with the pathway to a staged or phased implementation at the least or “responsible minimum” cost. Implementing a strategic infrastructure plan (i.e., architectural, electrical, mechanical and structural) allows for the eventual implantation of the entire technology plan.

## 8. Develop Technology System Implementation Plan

Core components of the technology system plan include standards for functional, performance and implementation. Documenting technology policies and procedures provides a guideline for future moves, adds, and changes. Establishing information management, staffing, support, training, budget, contingency disaster and recovery plans creates a strategic solution that can adapt to changes in market dynamics, business climate, and control or reduce costs. Given the ongoing development of new equipment, it is usually advisable to include a 3-year rotation for those components that are likely to need replacement due to advancing technology.

## 9. Communicate the Technology Change Management Plan

One of the most important aspects of becoming an effective strategic technology partner is keeping all of the initial constituencies informed of the status and progress of the plan. Using email, all-staff meetings, departmental meetings, and internal newsletters (or intranets) are all effective. The key is to make sure that you communicate the necessary components of the plan clearly and often so that all staff members understand what is taking place, when, and how their work will be affected.

## 10. Revisit, Renew, Refine the Technology Plan

A client's technology plan is a living document. As such, it needs to be continually updated and revised in response to changing business requirements. This presents an opportunity for the design consultant or integrator to forge a long-term relationship. When you provide a creative approach to the planning process, it constitutes a powerful technological opportunity for enhancing the overall mission and business objectives of the client's company.

As technology becomes an increasingly significant platform upon which business is conducted, clients are becoming more reliant on systems designers and integrators to assist with the planning and development of effective systems. This is not a delegated task, but an interactive and collaborative process, that presents an opportunity for the technology provider, whether design consultant or contractor, to provide true strategic value.

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