Hard Lessons for a Singaporean Printer while Embracing Technology

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Abstract

With higher broadband internet penetration worldwide and increasing adoption of new media, technology will play an even more significant role in the printing industry. It is important for printing companies to embrace technology as we progress. Winson Press has continuously invested in technology since 1995. The journey has not been smooth sailing; in fact, we have learnt many hard lessons while embracing technology. Technology is not a silver bullet, there is no quick fix to whatever problem that we may have. One of the most important factors for successful technology adoption is People. Technology can be bought but people must be built over time. Technology adoption will take more time than we expected and if we do not measure progress, the project will stall. Further, technology adoption is a journey and we need to continuously review our progress. In order to adopt technology successfully, we have found the following practices useful: have a written business plan, only adopt technology that is relevant, build the team before adopting technology, set clear measurable objectives and track progress weekly.

1. Background

1.1 State of Singapore Printing Industry

Singapore Printing Industry has been one of the top printing hubs in Asia. In 2009, Singaporean printers export approximately S$646 million worth of printed materials. Challenges faced by Singapore Printers include strong Singapore dollar, rising business cost, slowdown in global demand and competition from lower cost countries.

Singapore Government has been introducing many attractive measures to support local printing companies to adopt technology to improve productivity as well as that for business transformation. While Singapore Printing Industry faces competition from new media, increasing internet penetration provides convenience for customers thus offers opportunity for business transformation and
may drive demand.

No different to other developed countries, there have been consolidations in Singapore. In 2008, Toppan Printing Co., Ltd. acquired SNP Corporation Limited and in 2010, Opus Print Group acquired COS Printers Pte Ltd. There have also been a number of consolidations involving smaller privately held companies. This trend is likely to continue as economy growth slows.

1.2 Winson Press

Winson Press Pte Ltd was first established in 1965 as Winson Advertising, a graphic design and print brokerage firm. We have since transformed into a leading printing company in Singapore producing high quality printed products including paper boxes, labels, flexible packaging, blister foil, brochures, catalogues, point of sales materials, etc. We have developed core competency in a wide range of printing technologies ranging from Offset, High definition UV Flexo, Digital Offset to UV letterpress. We have a total of 105 committed team members at this moment. While we are still 100% local family owned, we are moving towards employee share ownership.

1.3 Technology milestone for Winson Press

Continuous Improvement is one of the core values for Winson Press, and we have been embracing technology over the years. Table 1 provides a summary of our technology adoption over the years.

2. Hard Lessons Learnt while Embracing Technology

It has been a continuous learning journey for Winson Press while we embrace technology. In our earlier projects, we took much longer than we should to adopt the technology. We managed to get back our returns on our investment in technology sooner as we learnt from our past experiences. Following are the hard lessons we learnt over the various projects we embarked on since 1995.

2.1 Technology is not a Silver Bullet

The first lesson we learnt is that technology is NOT a silver bullet. Even when the technological solution seems to contain all the features that are able to solve our problem, there are many more important factors on top of the technological solution we choose. For example, we started implementing our first MIS in 1995 but companywide adoption across all departments only happened in 2002! The solution looked good but many things were not in place; we do not have a dedicated project manager to tie up all the loose ends, our people were not discipline enough to key in all transactions, there was no proper system for product coding, etc.
Many of these factors are within our control and could have been avoided.

2.2 The Key Success Factor lies with People

If we can only choose one key success factor, it will be people. People include our project team members as well as those of our vendors. People are the most important factor that drives technology adoption and they will have to change their work habits when they adopt technology. This is easier said than done. Some of the challenges are:

- People are generally resistant to change and tend to stick to what they are familiar and comfortable with.
- Sending our people through the training conducted by our vendors is only the beginning, not the end. Most of the time, our people will need extra coaching and hand holding to change their habits.
- Inter-department conflicts

2.3 Implementation takes much longer than what we expect

Throughout all of our adoption of technology, none of the projects was done within the time frame set by our vendors. It can be best explained by Murphy’s Law which states that “Whatever can go wrong will go wrong.” There are simply many factors that can cause the delay, sometime internal while others caused by external factors beyond our control.

2.4 Things does not happen until we start to measure and track progress

Peter Drucker, one of the most influential management consultant once said: “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.” That is so true when we adopt technology. We do not measure the progress of our earlier projects and it is of no surprise that most of our earlier projects were delayed. It is important to have the right measure that is within our control and are measured by our internal people.

2.5 Technology adoption is a journey

Technology adoption is like a marathon without finishing line. There will always be a better way to get things done more effectively and further, due to the change in business environment, we have to continuously improve on our work process. For example, we continue to improve our ERP to improve user experience even after 5 years.

3. Our Current Practices for Adopting Technology

Over the years, we constantly review and reflect on how we can do better after any project completion. We observe some patterns and have found some effective practices for technology adoption. It is easier said than done and we found that the success of our technology adoption has been closely link to the following practices.

3.1 Have a written Business Plan with Quarterly Revision

We find that it is significant to have a business plan in writing. This is especially true for companies with limited resources. We review our business plan quarterly to make sure that our plan stays relevant. We also present our business plan to our entire company in different groups tailoring the content to suit the audience. On top of successful technology adoption, we have also gained the following benefits:

- We utilize our precious resources more effectively
- We increased the score of our employee engagement survey
- We get very good support from our bankers when we share our business plan with them

3.2 Only select Technologies that are in line with our strategic plan

Technology changes very fast and there are many solutions available. We are constantly being approached by numerous vendors proposing how their solutions can help us as well as which of our competitors have installed their solutions. We have to be very careful to adopt only those technologies that are in line with our strategic plan as well as our resources; people, financials and time. We refused to be affected when our vendors use herd instinct to persuade us. One of the most important evaluation criteria for vendors will be the integrity of their people
assisting us and their implementation knowledge.

3.3 Having the Right People in place is Critical

Technology can be bought whenever we have financial resources but we need time to build our people to embrace technology. We find the following very helpful when we build our team to adopt technology:

- Select project leaders who are passionate about continuous improvement and are key influencers
- Explain and let all our people involved understand “Why” are we embracing technology
- Show them how they can benefit from adopting technology
- Align all department involved with common objectives
- Reduce or eliminate any fear if there is any

3.4 Set Clear and measurable Objectives

We must first be very clear what we want to achieve from adopting the technology following which we prioritize the objectives. We have also found that it is more effective for us to build on success. Creating opportunities for “quick wins” is crucial for successful adoption.

- Define SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time based) objectives
- Prioritize the objectives
- Allocate resources (people, financial resources and time) accordingly
- Start small early to create quick wins

3.5 Visual Control of Weekly or daily progress

Upon setting measureable objectives, we link the objectives to the respective project manager’s appraisal. We also post the milestones on our score board in our conference room where it is highly visible. We will cater slightly more time for unforeseen circumstances. Our project managers will report on progress weekly. Initially when we started this, many of our people feel that we are micro-managing. But there are many benefits that we gained:

- Problems surface very early
- We can allocate resources more effectively
- We are a lot more focus on what matter most
- We get our return on investment a lot sooner than before