IT without tears

Investing in Information Technology (IT) can be daunting; even large, experienced organisations can get it terribly wrong ending up with out-of-control projects consuming endless resources with no end in sight. You can avoid a nightmare and adopt good systems in time and budget by following a few simple steps.

KEEP IT SIMPLE
The larger and more complex a project is the higher the likelihood of failure. The more that you want the computer system to do the more likely it is that you will be disappointed. Take one step at a time, keep it simple and focused on the essentials.

BE A FOLLOWER NOT A LEADER
Why be the first? Let someone else have that expensive and risky experience. You need a proven system that you can see operating successfully and can talk to people who use it. If you want to be the first in Australia with a system from overseas check that it will meet local requirements for reporting and that there are staff available on the ground locally to support you.

GET EXPERT ADVICE
Would you use your existing admin or clinical staff to build a new wing to your facility? Probably not, so unless you have your own very good IT department don't your divert your staff to run an IT project. Engage a qualified **Project Manager** with a track record of delivering similar projects on time and budget. Your staff will need to participate in workshops and training sessions which will be more than enough disruption.

START WITH A PLAN
All successful projects start with a solid plan.
IT Strategic Plan
Your IT Plan should support your Business Plan, describe your current systems, problems and issues, show where the needs are, priorities for new technologies and benefits. A **Table of Contents** might include:

- Vision, eg "We will evaluate for adoption, proven technologies that can deliver tangible benefits for our clients, staff and business"
- Mission, eg "The role of our IT is to improve care, achieve efficiencies and reduce paperwork"
- Current status
- Problems and issues
- Available technologies and trends
- Candidate solutions prioritised against ROI and alignment with corporate strategy
- Adoption plan over a 3-5 year period

Your IT Strategic Plan should also outline your **IT Environment**. This will describe whether, for example, any new system needs to operate across more than one site and what other systems it needs to integrate with. Your CEO or Board should approve the **Business Case** for your top priority IT investment. This should justify the project, the

timeframe, how benefits will be realised, the risks and how they will be managed and the ROI.

Project Plan
The Project Plan must show the **Critical Path**, dependencies between tasks and how any slippage will impact other steps and final completion date. Delays will add to costs.

Variation approval process
Once the Project Plan is approved any changes must be agreed to through a Variation Process. These include changes to dates, functionality and costs. Minimise the temptation to add features. IT projects typically suffer from scope creep. Focus on delivering the essential core.

APPOINT A STEERING COMMITTEE AND ACTIVELY MONITOR THE PROJECT
The CEO must chair the project Steering Committee which needs to take an active role in monitoring the project. At meetings project reports should specify progress against the Project Plan. IT projects have a poor history of delivering on time and budget.

DOCUMENT AND PRIORITISE YOUR NEEDS
Unlike other purchases, eg a car where you can presume it will have 4 wheels and an engine, IT can be anything. What, for example, is a health information system? Without a document describing what it is that you want the system to do it will be difficult to obtain understandable proposals from vendors, to compare systems and to hold your supplier accountable.

BUY OR BUILD?
It is best to purchase existing systems if available rather than build your own or to have one specially built for you. A proven system will be less risky and available sooner than a custom-built one. If you are the only user of a system then you will pay all costs for maintaining it rather than sharing that cost with other users of an “off-the-shelf” system.

COMPARING APPLES WITH APPLES
A final step before inviting proposals is to prepare the **Evaluation Methodology.** This will indicate the relative priority of everything that you are asking for. It will provide the weighting that you will apply when you score the features of each product to ensure a sound purchase decision.

COSTS – NOT JUST THE PURCHASE PRICE
It is good practice to ask potential suppliers to provide their costings in a separate package which is only opened when you are down to 2-3 short-listed potential products. You need to compare the **5-year total cost of ownership**. This includes the initial purchase price, interfaces to other systems, implementation, and annual maintenance costs, and costs of future releases. Don’t forget the additional costs to your own organisation that your supplier might overlook. These include release of staff for the project, infrastructure costs of computer hardware, cabling etc.

DON'T FORGET – CHECK LIST
What other things do you need to NOT FORGET?

- a Project Manager with a track record of success in similar projects.
- a Steering Committee chaired by the CEO
- an understandable Project Plan and monitoring regime
- a communications plan to inform staff and others about the project – with particular attention to impacts on staffing and to give appropriate reassurances on redundancies
- the project plan includes the time for staff in workshops and training