The Trouble With Technology

by | Wayne Toczek

Technology is a funny thing. It can make your life easier, but it can present challenges of its own when not chosen or used wisely.

ANYONE WHO USES MICROSOFT OFFICE EXCEL can perhaps identify. Think of this scenario which you have likely run into at some time: An untrained user takes a pile of papers, invoices, or receipts to enter into an Excel spreadsheet, but rather than use the functions afforded by the program to keep track of totals, the user is tapping away at a calculator or adding machine to make additions and calculations of the items being entered into Excel. When the user runs into an error, he can't research the error on the calculator without starting over, or has to look over the adding machine tape to find the discrepancy. What's wrong with this picture? Excel has the capability to do the addition and make multiple calculations while keeping track of the items being entered. Additionally, the user can readily see any discrepancies and edit them quickly, saving time and energy. Incredibly, this technology is right there in front of the user but is not utilized; and that is just a hint of what that program can do for users.

Did the user overbuy the technology or just fail to use it properly to reap the benefits? In many situations when people buy things for the technology offered, they are easily sold on the *potential* of the technology, but then fail to take the time or initiative to learn how to use it to their benefit. Or worse, people light up at the technology offered by the product, but never end up using it because they just don't need it, and therefore overbought.

When I started my business I purchased QuickBooks, and it was not cheap. So I maximize the features it offers, such as an electronic checkbook and electronic invoicing, and that makes

the software cost easier to swallow. I've noticed other businesses, however, that still use handwritten checkbooks and mail invoices rather than sending them electronically, despite having QuickBooks on their computers. This example is not meant to offend anyone, but it illustrates the point that people often don't understand how to use the technology they've invested in and have available to them at their fingertips, simply because they don't take the time to learn how to apply it to their tasks.

The old saying from the book *Who Moved My Cheese?* comes to mind: "Change or become extinct." Technology waits for no one, and just as the fax is being replaced by the scanner and e-mail (which is good because home and office phone land lines are being replaced by cell phones), technology can save time,

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Printed cookbooks are now being replaced by electronic cookbooks. Think of what this technology has to offer chefs. It would be senseless to just print a recipe without first scaling it to the needed portion size and amount. All recipe programs have this feature, and one scaled recipe that reduces waste or over production will not only pay for the program, but also save more money over time.

Take note that some features offered by new technologies may seem like a great commodity, but are of no value if not useful to the operation, or needs of a business. Here are some examples I imagine we have experienced in our lives…When buying a new oven for your home, do you buy one with convection "heat" and pay extra for that feature, or do you simply get a standard conventional oven? For your catering or special meals business, do you purchase a traditional butane burner, or do you get the newer technology—the induction burner? What is trendier and what is more practical? What are the limitations of each? Perhaps a particular plug must be used with one of them. Maybe the other poses a fire hazard.

I recently had a meeting with a colleague and we marveled at how technology has come full circle in the foodservice industry. We compared simple plastic tray cards listing likes, dislikes, and other pertinent information, to complex tray cards listing more than you would ever need or could ever read, back to a simple need for data and logical sorts. Culture has changed and technology is adapting.

Knowledge is powerful, and knowing what features technology has to offer which will be beneficial versus what will be of no benefit can be invaluable. I find it interesting to ask an equipment salesperson if they have used the equipment in an actual operation, and if so, were the features they are highlighting beneficial, or is the salesperson simply quoting the equipment's user manual and selling the nice-to-have features. For example, having a digital electronic panel versus a dial on a piece of equipment. What is more productive, and more important, what will be used? Ask questions. A friend was telling me about his equipment and a feature called thermostatic cooking. I asked what it was and how it was important to the user. He explained in simple terms how the equipment is used in an everyday scenario and therefore how it was important to the user, and I found it to be a differentiating factor or technology with its competition.

Sometimes, once something is bought and actually used, the features sold or presented do not work out the way they were perceived to. Then the user tries desperately to get assistance from a "help desk," but the person working there has never

operated the equipment in an actual operation and cannot relate to what the user is trying to do. The communication gap is frustrating. The help desk is talking in technical terms and the user is then confused and asking, "What is that?" rather than getting answers that can be readily understood. Sometimes you hear "A click of the button" and reports come out, but they are not what you thought they would be. Now the expensive program that was meant to allow you more time to engage in the operation becomes nothing more than another nuisance to deal with, and you begin to use only limited features and circumvent half the features that were the reason you originally bought the program.

This often happens with vendors. They have great order programs that, unfortunately, are designed more for the warehouse than the user. Often, rather than creating an order guide, the manager uses an order history that may be loaded with things such as one-time buy items to five different types of something, say for example, tomato sauce. The program is not set up by week or based on the menu. The manager then ends up doing that on a tablet and spends more time cherry-picking items and often deal items that are sometimes marked or have a flag to alert the user if the item is missed. The process is further complicated by limited rhyme or reason to the order. Items are not organized as they should be by sheet to shelf; they are just randomly somewhere on the sheet, and in too many instances, the user ends up calling the sales rep for help finding an item. The whole order process becomes too complex, and not understanding features has created unnecessary work and stress.

Is it not worth learning how the system thinks and what it can and can't do before recreating the wheel? A good example is taking inventory. Many great managers spend hours on Excel creating formulas and entering food items to cost out. Some software has that function, but if not, why not create a fake order based on what you have and let the vendor software cost it out? The manager thinks, "Well, every item is not on the order." So what? Learn to be consistent on what you inventory and how. If you count a roast that has been cooked off one day prior, but it's reduced in size, count it as it was before cooked. Say it was used that day and half is left over; maybe you don't count it then. The important thing is to be consistent on what you count and when it counts. Open spice jars do not count, but on the shelf they do, and so on.

EVALUATING A FOOD VENDOR'S SOFTWARE

So how do you evaluate a food vendor's software to make sure it's productive for you and will make your job easier? Think about these questions, make sure you know how to use the software, and ensure your vendor takes the time to train you.

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- Do they speak your language (layman's terms) or expect you to learn their technical language?
- How does this save you time and make your life easier?
- Is it simple to use?
- Can you be trained and then do you understand the functions and are they easy to perform?
- Does it make sense, like ordering from eBay or an online store or getting on Facebook?
- Does it have a *save* function in case you accidently get booted out? Nothing is more frustrating than creating an order and then losing it all.
- Can you export to Excel if needed, or vice versa, to make customizing and e-mailing easier?
- Can you create your own customized order guides, not order history, but actual named order guides?
- Can they be easily sequenced to meet your needs and your storage areas?
- Can you search by name, cost (price range), and size? In other words, can you filter your search so you find what you want, not what the vendor wants you to see?
- Can you recall an item you may have ordered in the past?
- Can it provide instant electronic copies of invoices that can be forwarded to accounting once approved or researched if lost? Why not? Have you asked?
- Are you given advance warning on substitutes and options? Can you make the decision on the substitute item, since it's in electronic format? And in real time, will you be notified in advance or surprised on delivery?
- Thinking ahead, can you track your order, much like UPS or ordering from Dominos?
- Can you see the credit appear online in a day or so? Snail mail takes too long and requires too much energy.

EDUCATE YOURSELF AND YOUR BOSS

When you are told that the vendor has a menu at a hard-to-believe cost, do not automatically believe it. There are too many variables, i.e., what about the other items, such as milk

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and dairy? Where do they fall in the mix and what about other factors that affect food cost—over production, environmental or economical effect, yield, case size, etc. Educate and explain to your boss how in a perfect world that cost might still be impossible. Even more, what do the products on the menu taste like? Can your clients relate to the menu? What effect does every change in the menu have? In the end, question, and investigate claims. Remember, perception is your superior's reality at times.

THINK ABOUT TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Find out if a program and its features are intuitive, whether it takes days of intense training, and whether you can purchase various support plans. A good program thinks like the operator, not like a programmer. Being intuitive is key. The program should make sense to even the novice, if possible.

Are you locked in the program and not able to get out without starting over? Nothing is ever really free or without strings attached. The offering of a program is much like a free dispenser, however maybe only that company's product will fit with the program. Yes, particular options may work with the program, but only if you buy the brand offered by the program's company. It may be that the program's expectations or restrictions are being sold as a benefit. The startup time in using a new system with only its products will be a waste of time and resources if you change your mind soon after purchasing the program due to its restrictions on expectations not known to you at the time of purchase.

I'm also skeptical of software changes requested by users that require approval from the software company when it's basic and simply makes sense to upgrade the software to be more user-friendly. I, as well as you, assuredly find it frustrating when the user is not empowered to make adjustments after business hours or until the next business day. This often shows a clear lack of understanding of users' needs. Imagine telling your customer, "We will get you that cup of coffee by the next business day or so, during business hours." In today's world, with all the technol-

ogy available, that should never happen, but does the product you're buying understand that it shouldn't happen—that you should be able to operate outside standard "business hours?"

BEWARE OF BELLS AND WHISTLES

Sometimes when it sounds too good, it may be. Alternatively, maybe the amount of time spent setting up and maintaining some new technology warrants the result and the cost or a feature that can help produce a superior item if the feature is used correctly. Just make sure you know what you are getting and what it can and can't do. I don't like hearing sales reps say that at the click of a button you will have a complete order, or program this in and you will have the perfect roast by using number 4 on the key pad. Consider if the price is actually worth the extra features or technology. How will it pay for itself or offer improvement to you, the user?

DON'T DISMISS THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Perpetual inventories are for department stores and grocery stores. Not understanding that will only result in disappointment to any other user. Programmed cooking times must consider various factors; the human element comes into play in this situation. Shame on the buyer who does not ask questions first. Don't get me wrong—some technology is just as simple as your microwave's popcorn button, but even in that example, human interaction cannot be dismissed. Sometimes you need to open the microwave door to stop the cooking prior to the programmed running time.

So this new program you are learning about can cook the perfect roast or can generate an order list for the menu. Remember, however, that the actual list of items in the amounts needed are only as good as the updated counts. Last-minute usage based on late changes, condiments, recipes and current inventory, not to mention leftovers, and the tracking of over and under production all need to be taken into account. All require the human element to kick in and assess these factors. What if you work in a CCRC and maybe do not or will not use the system for all aspects, then what? You buy a different system for each aspect? Or can there be integration? If not now, then in the future? Will anyone in the software company listen and validate your concerns or needs? More importantly, will they even *understand* your concerns and needs?

SOME STANDARDS DO NOT CHANGE

No system will ever completely take the place of the human elements such as forecasting, historical trends, the weather, payday for your retail area, and other variables that can never be input as a definite into a computer. The computer is only as good as the information put into it; it is unaware of last-minute changes

and additions. Use the information as a reference, but be leery that complete blind faith is disastrous. Hence, a simple click of the button can never do it all. New technology that heats a pellet in 30 seconds will not save time or space, and even more important, reach the correct temperature if the pellet is not on the charger for 30 seconds. Buyers beware, ask questions, see it in action, and get references from actual users—not the sales and marketing team. Think about where you are left as technology changes, whether you can upgrade like an Apple iPad at Best Buy, or whether you will be stuck waiting another 20 years for the equipment or program to depreciate. Make all of this a part of the thought process and actual discussions.

WHAT YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND

Always understand the assumptions of a program or piece of equipment. Spell Check is a great example and now even auto-

rectly to the user's needs. So keep this in mind—invest the time to set up the software or equipment to your specifications from the beginning. If you understand what you are buying and the capabilities of the program or equipment, your investment will pay off in multitude, and you will see benefits follow.

HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Expect the technology to make your job easier, solve a problem, and reduce mindless tasks. Expect the technology to keep you more organized or allow you to make better decisions and give you more time in front of the customer. Expect and ensure that the time invested in a new program will warrant a return. If you have to add hours or dedicate more time to get results beyond the startup, is the end result worth that extra time and dedication? Will it even be used or seen as a value to you?

> 66 **The computer is only as good as the information put into it;** it is unaware of last-minute changes and additions. Use the information as a reference, but be leery that complete blind faith is disastrous. 99

check and fill-in programs all have one thing in common: they don't know exactly what you are saying. They give you variables based on what you have input, and ultimately you pick the correct variable. I'm a notoriously bad speller and rely on a human editor, simply because even Spell Check does not cover all the bases. They're, there, their—which is it? A program will not know which is the correct variable. Understanding how the program thinks can save you time and trouble later, so don't hesitate to ask questions of the sales reps. Are they a user from the past? Have they worked a day in your shoes to understand what's important to you? If they have not, ask to talk with a current user or, better yet, visit one.

KNOW HOW TO MAXIMIZE

Remember the old saying, "If you don't take the time to do it right the first time, when are you going to have the time to fix it?" Rest assured, you will not have time to fix things later. Rather, people will often continue to jump through hoops and take unnecessary steps to get something where it needs to be, instead of taking the time to fix something so it operates cor-

For example, do you have a steam jacket kettle and your cooks still use boilers to cook soup because the production staff does not want to clean the equipment?

If you believe, they will believe. Get your staff involved in demonstrations and let them ask questions or pose arguments if needed. Actual user input is invaluable. Remember the story of the truck stuck under a bridge and all the engineers trying to figure out a solution? Raise the bridge, cut the truck, or pull it out…and finally the little boy who said, "Can't you just let the air out of the tires?" In the end, the technology you are purchasing is being used by your staff as well, so staff involvement counts.

MAXIMIZE RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Inevitably, you must calculate whether there is a payback on your investment. I recently spoke with an owner of a self-storage company who had mailed an invoice to me. For starters, he had my name wrong on the invoice; but then when I paid the invoice, he was confused as to why I was paying him

because the check was generated from my company account. Consequently he called to ask what I was paying him for. I inquired why he could not have cross-referenced the address on my check with the addresses to which he sends invoices. He replied, "I have 500 units." I asked why he couldn't look at them electronically. He simply said, "No, that is not how we do it." I wondered then and asked him, "You mail out 500 invoices every month?" Think about that. At 44 cents per stamp, 500 invoices mailed out 12 times a year, the cost of stamps and envelopes alone is at least $2,700. If this business owner would use the technology of Quick Books or any other accounting program, he could e-mail a majority of the invoices rather than mail them. Even if only a quarter or half of the customers had e-mail access, he would save money, not to mention his valuable time. His comment, however, was, "We have a system already; it prints labels and we can't look at anything else." Clearly, the idea of learning to use technology to his advantage was beyond his thinking. He spent valuable time and money printing invoices, stuffing them in envelopes, licking envelopes, and buying and sticking postage stamps on the envelopes. Yes, his system works, but his failure to embrace or even research time- and money-saving possibilities is just inconceivable. So, when you are presented with technology, look beyond now.

Food Protection Connection ?!

Following are answers to the "Food Safety When Batch Cooking" review questions printed on page 16.

1. B	**3. C**	**5. A**	**7. B**
2. A	**4. B**	**6. C**	

Please remember to complete the two short essay questions before submitting the CE form.

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CPE # D1005   ANFP # 361

Ask:

- Will it save me time? If so, can I re-invest that time to improve my business or operation?
- Is there an investment payback?
- Will it grow with the business needs?
- Will it help solve a problem that is important to my operation?
- Will I be able to, and will I, use it correctly and will my staff?
- Can I make a task easier and therefore save on labor?
- Can it compensate for human error?
- Can it make an average result a better and improved result?
- How long will it take me to begin using it correctly so that it is advantageous to me?
- Does the person explaining it comprehend a day in your shoes, actually using it?
- Is there a case study and users I can talk with?
- How much support will be provided to me?
- Anything else you see as important.

In many ways you are already using technology to your advantage—perhaps you pay bills online, saving you the cost of stamps and, more important, maybe even avoiding late fees. Paper reduction and cashless transactions are the way of the future. Some standards are already set, such as electronic statements. Even department stores now offer online receipts and some provide a lookup of your account by the credit card you used. Technology is moving forward with or without you, and failure to utilize it properly can eat up the one thing that we only get so much of—time. Whether it's digging through mounds of paper, or tallying items by hand, most technological advancements can be learned in little time.

SUMMING IT UP

Embrace the future and the many forms of technology available, but do your homework and know exactly what responsibilities and obligations you will bear to get the most out of your investment. Understand the difference between "must have" features and "nice to have" features, and whether you can get what you need from it or if it's too much or too difficult to learn. Knowledge is power. Educate yourself and understand what your [I mean "you're"—that darn Spell Check] getting and not getting with the technology out there. ⏱

Wayne Toczek is CEO of Innovations Services, Norwalk, OH. He's author of *The Dining Experience* and *The Customer Experience*, and co-author of *Food Service Tune Up* and *Safe Dining for the Highly Susceptible Customer.* Contact him at (419) 663-9300 or visit www. innovaservices.info