

Club Software: Replace or Reengineer?

By Bill Boothe

Next Up: How to reengineer your club's software and technology environment, and how reengineering improves results – regardless of whether you retain or replace your management software.

If you're dissatisfied with your club's management software, you face a tough decision: buy new or keep what you have and squeeze as much out of it as you can. Clubs make that decision every day on myriad items: golf course equipment, clubhouse furniture, carpeting and draperies, the clubhouse roof and kitchen equipment. We face similar decisions in our personal lives: buy a new car or keep the one we have for a few more years, buy a new house or improve our existing home, buy

a new PC with the latest hi-resolution graphics capabilities and lightning-speed processor or nurse the old favorite along for a few more years? We base these decisions on a variety of factors and hope to make balanced, rational choices.

The Decision Drivers

Deciding whether to replace or keep your club's management software is a much tougher challenge than in years past because the decision drivers have changed. During the late '90s, clubs were mostly replacing DOS-based systems to avoid the Y2K scare. The replacement surge continued through 2006 or so, as clubs sought new solutions to embrace Windows and solve hardware compatibility issues, add basic database capabilities, and move away from vendors delivering poor reliability or sub-par customer service. The factors driving those decisions were tangible and relatively easy to cost-justify.

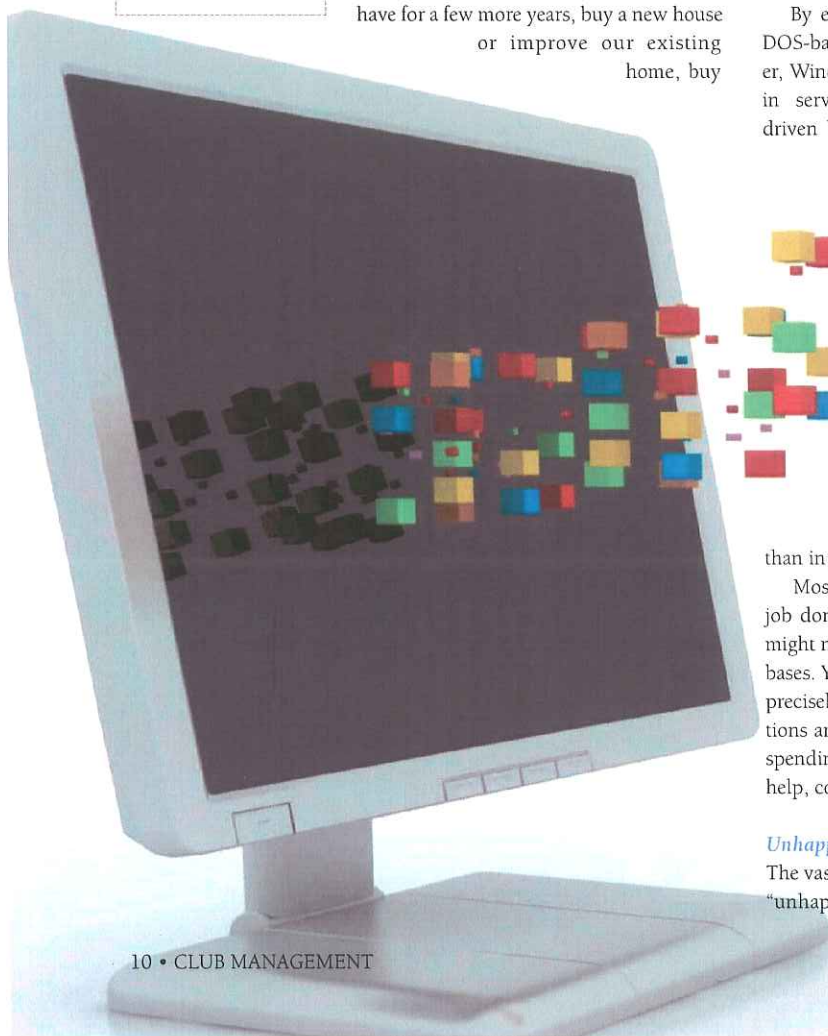
By early 2007, the game changed dramatically. Most of the DOS-based systems were gone, and clubs began replacing newer, Windows-based solutions – some only a few years in service. Those replacements were driven by different factors:

data mining and business intelligence capabilities, customer relationship management functionality, and marketing support features – factors that are much less tangible than in prior years and more difficult to cost-justify.

Most clubs today use management software that gets the basic job done: member billing, accounting, POS and reservations. It might not be the latest or most powerful, but it covers most of the bases. Yet for many, that just doesn't meet expectations. And that's precisely the intent of this article. If your club's software expectations are unrealistic or based on faulty assumptions, you may be spending loads of cash on replacing software that, with a little help, could actually meet your needs.

Unhappiness Leads to Change

The vast majority of clubs replace their software because they are "unhappy" with it. Seems simple enough. Don't like what you



have? Get something new and better. But what if your unhappiness is:

- Related to issues that can be easily resolved.
- Blown out of proportion compared to the actual problems.
- More related to poor processes than the software itself.
- An excuse for users who lack knowledge or are just plain lazy.
- Based upon unrealistic expectations.
- All of the above.

Enter reengineering. For decades, business and industry have used reengineering to affect process improvement, cost reduction, productivity increases and revenue enhancement. Endless books and articles have been written and courses taught on the subject. Great successes have been achieved.

What Is Software Reengineering?

The main focus of software reengineering is a thorough analysis of the key factors that affect how well the software can perform and what affects the club's perception of that performance. Right off the bat, reengineering differentiates itself from replacement in two critical ways.

First, the basic assumption. Selection assumes that the legacy system is the root cause of the unhappiness, and cannot be salvaged. Reengineering, on the other hand, demands that the existing system be proven to be the root cause of the disenchantment and be proven to be unsalvageable.

Second, the mindset. The selection mindset immediately focuses on identifying the "best fit" replacement system with no real thought toward improving the legacy system. Reengineering initially focuses on maximizing the capabilities of the existing system, procedures and personnel. Then, reengineering evaluates the cost benefit of replacement vs. retention and either justifies the retention of the existing systems and initiates reengineering activities or shifts the focus to selecting the "best fit" replacement system.

Reengineering Analysis Steps

Reengineering begins with a thorough analysis of the club's "software environment." Six key factors are evaluated in an effort to understand how well the software is actually performing and what factors may be affecting the perception of that performance. Let's review each of the analysis steps.

1. Performance Expectations Analysis is designed to evaluate how realistic the club's expectations are of the software. The club's general manager/COO, board members, department heads and key users are interviewed. The goal is to document expectations and determine if those expectations are reasonable. For example, it's not uncommon for board members, who in their professions may have operated in highly sophisticated (and very expensive) technology environments, to carry unrealistically high expectations for relatively low-cost club solutions. It's also rather common for club managers to draw their conclusions about software performance entirely from information provided by subordinates – with no first-hand experience to draw on. And it's not unusual for club personnel to blame the software for performance issues that are better explained by their own lack of knowledge.

2. Key Process Mapping is used to gain a complete understanding of the key operational procedures currently in use. The purpose of this exercise is to determine if the club's software is compatible with the current procedures. Mapping identifies what adjustments (in the procedures and/or software) are needed to be successful. As you might imagine, we have uncovered many instances where the procedures employed by a certain department were inconsistent with the software's capabilities, leading to dissatisfaction. Minor process adjustments often can solve these conflicts, which may dampen the motivation for replacement. Plus, if retention isn't the chosen path, retaining poorly constructed processes can compromise the success of a new replacement system.

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3. **Functional Requirements Analysis** employs the same approach used with traditional replacement systems evaluations. Interviews are conducted with key personnel in each club department, and a detailed features/functionality checklist is produced. The analysis evaluates the capability of the existing system, as well as potential replacement systems, to satisfy the features/functionality checklist. Most importantly, it evaluates the relative value of any additional features/functionality offered by the replacement systems.
4. **Management Information Requirements Analysis.** The quest for better management information represents the most common reason given today for replacing legacy systems. A "promise" of advanced information management, business intelligence, data mining, key performance indicators (KPIs) and performance dashboards often serves to justify the cost and turmoil associated with replacing legacy systems. This analysis begins with a review of each department's "wish list" for improved reporting, with a determination if "wish list" reports can be produced by the existing system. An evaluation of "ad hoc" information generating

needs of each department comes next, followed by evaluating the capability of the club's personnel to extract data from the existing or replacement systems. The analysis culminates with an important determination: which will offer the greater value – a new system or an upgrade in user skills?

5. **Infrastructure Adequacy Analysis** involves a thorough evaluation of the club's technology infrastructure. Unfortunately, some clubs confuse infrastructure shortcomings with software failures. Unreliable, poorly maintained equipment and connectivity can make software appear to be the source of many performance problems. Switches, routers and connectivity (cabling, wireless), servers, desktop equipment, peripherals, specialty equipment and operating systems all must be considered. The analysis should determine what needs to be improved to make the club's infrastructure "adequate" (with estimated costs) for the existing as well as replacement software solutions. Most importantly, a determination is made if the club's current infrastructure (rather than the software) is a factor in motivating requests for a replacement system.

6. **User Capability Analysis.** Often overlooked, a thorough evaluation of user capabilities rounds out the analysis process. It's easy to confuse poor user capability with poor systems performance. Since most clubs spend little or nothing on user training after the initial system implementation, it's important to determine if limited user capabilities are a factor in motivating requests for a replacement system. The analysis focuses on skills of the key users in each department: general computer literacy, proficiency with Microsoft Office products, general understanding of data extraction and reporting, general understanding of network/equipment vs. club software problems, ability to articulate problems encountered, and, of course, proficiency on the existing club software.

In addition, the attitudes of the key users in each department are evaluated: willingness to continuously learn, willingness to "own the system," and willingness to work with the software vendor to explore solutions. This final analysis step culminates by categorizing each key user's knowledge and attitude as excellent, good, fair or poor. You'll learn more about the role that knowledge and attitude might be playing in motivating requests for a replacement system.

The End Game

Based upon the results of these six analysis steps, you are ready to decide if replacement or retention with reengineering is the best course of action for your club. The decision process is rather straightforward. For each analysis step, determine the value (tangible improvements) of replacement vs. retention. Then determine the relative cost (dollars, time commitment and business interruption) of each approach. Finally, decide which method – replacement or retention with reengineering – offers the best overall value for your club. ■

About the author

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