

## Issue Brief

# The Four 'P's of Selecting an Effective IT Solution: A Checklist for Elected Officials

## Introduction

As elected officials grapple with smaller budgets and staff, it is difficult to imagine investing in technology. However, many cities and counties are making the investment to respond to greater workloads, and a need for more transparency, self-service solutions, robust websites and smartphone apps. Previously, IT decisions didn't make their way to elected officials until demand required them, and even then, only when funding was available. As a result, IT solutions could be acquired in piecemeal fashion in response to department problems or needs, but without an eye to higher-level or long-term planning. Now, as decision-makers, elected officials have a unique opportunity to instead consider what IT solutions would bring most benefit across the enterprise, positively impacting both government and constituents.

A comprehensive plan for the selection and application of IT solutions is an important foundation to successful government operations. An enterprise solution can provide many of the universal benefits that elected officials seek for their constituents from increased productivity and budget savings to expanded services and improved accessibility. Still, selecting the ideal IT provider and platform, and knowing what to look for in a solution before investing can be confounding, especially for elected officials with less experience in a high-tech environment. The following checklist provides direction for elected officials considering broad-level IT solutions for government. Overall, it is important to think about four main areas: product, platform, price and partnership.

## Product

Elected officials' concerns often focus in on department needs to store data and accomplish basic, but critical functions like accounting. A well-chosen enterprise solution can solve department needs and also reduce costs, increase efficiencies and maximize the use of personnel in ways that best serve constituents. For instance, the purchase of an enterprise content management system transitions paper-based processes into digital processes with reduced storage costs and greater accessibility, thus easing burdens on staff time and freeing personnel to focus on constituent services both departmentally and across the enterprise.

Elected officials also want solutions that can scale over time, and that won't require ongoing investment. Government is constantly changing due to new policies and regulations, so it is important that an IT product be flexible to meet changing mandates and programs without having to replace the entire system, or without having to create a patchwork of products from multiple IT providers that are not interoperable.



## Considerations

When looking for an IT product that will benefit government functioning, think about the following:

- ✓ What is the scope of the product? Does it have broad coverage?
- ✓ Is it something that can be leveraged and customized for multiple purposes and department needs?
- ✓ What kind of accessibility is offered by the product? Can it be made available to workers in different locations or those who are working remotely?
- ✓ Does the product offer centralized storage for data and documents so that information can be accessed across programs and departments?

## Platform

It is important to think about the adaptability of a solution, or how easily and affordably it can be customized or updated, so that precious dollars are not spent on a solution that does not offer the capabilities to adapt to department, enterprise and future needs. Elected officials, when considering what platform to select, should think about the breadth of options available to customize the platform to avoid unnecessary spending on functions that will not be used or are not needed.

It is also important to adopt a platform that can be enhanced or expanded down the road. Government funding may be limited at the time of initial acquisition, but this should not put a cap on all future technological advancements, or the hope of maintaining an integrated solution that can grow across the enterprise. A platform that can be enhanced seamlessly with future additions is a much more

far-reaching solution than one that is obtained to fix immediate needs. Ideally, the platform should be adaptable enough to allow variation in hosting and use, providing multiple options for how to best utilize it across programs and departments.

### Considerations

When thinking about the right platform to select, consider the following:

- ✓ Does the platform come one-size-fits-all, or is it adaptable to your specialized needs?
- ✓ Do you have the option to start small and add greater functionalities down the road?
- ✓ Does the platform allow you to share services and data across users?
- ✓ Do you have options regarding where the platform is hosted?
- ✓ Do you have options regarding how the platform is deployed?

### Price

The implications of a well-chosen and tailored solution can relate directly back to broader policy and operational goals, and can improve cost efficiencies in government across the board. Choosing an IT solution that is well-priced and that enables a host of support functions is key to providing long-term budgetary benefits. There are several hidden costs that can arise during the selection, adoption and use of an IT solution, so it is important to plan ahead for these. For instance, costs can arise when customizing software to fit the specific needs of an organization. While the cost of software may seem outwardly reasonable, it may take extensive customization to make the software work for an organization's specific needs. Some companies charge many times what they charge for the software itself. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider what costs are behind the software's implementation, and not just how it is priced outright.

It is also important to find out how the system will be tested and fixed, and what kind of tech support is available. Many providers charge extra for test and development versions of their solution, and to have a well-functioning system, this step is critical (with multiple rounds of testing and revisions often needed). It is important to select a system that has easily accessible and helpful tech support — the system is worthless if your users can't use it.

### Considerations

When thinking about the costs involved in an IT solution, consider the following:

- ✓ Is customization a readily available option? How much will it cost to customize the software to fit your needs? How long has it taken to implement similar projects among the vendor's customers?
- ✓ Are you forced to purchase things you don't need as part of a pre-packaged set? Are they flexible?

- ✓ Are test and development instances provided for free or are you forced to buy additional licenses?
- ✓ What kind of tech support is available? Does it cost to access it, or is it included in maintenance? What hours can it be accessed, and what resources are there to help (i.e. automated, or live person)?

### Partnership

Finally, elected officials must think about the long-term partnerships formed with the IT vendors that support their ongoing needs. Selecting an IT vendor that will not be around to provide comprehensive support and enhancements to a system that was intended to serve the government for years to come decreases the value and lifespan of the solution. Nor does it benefit the organization to partner with a provider that has poor systems for collecting customer feedback or enhancement requests. It is important to find a provider that supports the needs of government operations. The same applies to the functionality of the system. Some companies do not train their customers to be self-sufficient on the adaptability of their system, forcing clients to hire the company back to implement any needed changes. Having the capacity to change one's own system can reduce costs in the long run, so it is important to make sure this option is available.

### Considerations

When choosing the right IT provider to partner with, think about the following:

- ✓ Is the IT partner an established entity that you can rely on being around for years to come, and that has government expertise? Is your solution part of the core business of the vendor, or was it an acquired technology?
- ✓ What kind of system training is made available by the IT partner — is it available remotely, or is travel to training necessary? Does training on the system cost extra?
- ✓ Are there requirements that the IT partner be the one to make any changes on the system, or is the system something you can own outright and learn how to manipulate internally?
- ✓ How accessible is the IT partner to its customers? How responsive are they to customer requests?
- ✓ How much has been spent to enhance or improve the system? Are new versions included in your annual maintenance?

### Final Thoughts

Keeping in mind these considerations in the areas of product, platform, price and partnership, elected officials can make responsible, far-reaching choices that enhance government operations with technology. Investing in smart solutions will help accomplish many core goals like improving efficiency, reducing costs and providing more constituent services that will keep serving government and constituents well after their time in office is completed.

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