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In the previous article, the topic covered was supply chain integration. To recap, it enabled your internal system to seamlessly link with those of your customers and suppliers. As a result, it helped to increase efficiency by improving communication and reducing cost. Ultimately, it provides you with a tool that enables you to win and retain more business. The focus of this article is how to make the solution pay for itself.

Some time ago, an article appeared in the press questioning the usefulness of ICT as a business tool. It argued that systems were difficult, time-consuming, people hungry, complicated, an encumbrance to business agility and seemingly never-ending. It failed to add necessary which is today's reality. Understandably, it caused a furore within the computer sector with many pundits leaping to the defence of the industry. However, the author had a point. Most IT vendors were so focused on technology that they forgot that customers had to use it. This resulted in customers straightjacketing their businesses by using inflexible systems.

The ICT industry downturn post 2000 has caused many technology suppliers to re-examine their market offerings. Their market research indicated that customers were fed up buying expensive solutions that fell short of expectations and failed to produce any real improvements. The message was clear: either supply affordable business solutions that can solve the real business issues that cause us pain or we will refuse to invest.

This is now getting through and you will now see many technology companies repositioning themselves as solutions oriented. Fortunately, it is also reflected in modern business management systems. These are now more flexible, affordable and targeted at solving the efficiency and communications issues that cause real problems in business environments. As a result, they are finally delivering the rapid returns on investment that deliver real customer value. The best way to illustrate this is to relay a real life example of where Anglia, working in partnership with a customer, has achieved some notable commercial gains in a supply chain situation.

A designer and importer of merchandising equipment supplied to large retail chains had a system provided by a leading UK vendor. Although feature rich, it was designed and written in the mid 80's. The system was inflexible. This resulted in supplementary systems being developed in Access and Excel spreadsheets to

extract meaningful information from the system. The company analysed the hidden costs involved in the data duplication taking place throughout the business. It concluded that, not alone were the total costs of ownership considerable but that the system was a real barrier to the future growth of the business.

Switching to a more modern business management system was a revelation to the organisation. It removed the data duplication throughout the business with information entered once and shared with every user. Administrators were redeployed to focus on improving customer service. Over £400,000 of working capital was released through better inventory management. Purchasing costs were reduced while the quality of products from suppliers improved. In short, the system had paid for itself within six months of installation.

This is just one example. There are many others on our web site at www.angliabs.com. The point is that the availability of modern solutions to mid range companies can enable them to use ICT as a real differentiator. In the information age, this can prove vital as an aid for fresh produce companies struggling to cope with an increasingly demanding customer base.

In the next article, I will be returning to this topic with other examples of how to make technology pay.

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