

Application Erosion: What Is It? And How Do You Avoid It?

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If you've noticed that over time, your organization is using less and less of your business system or software solution, you can blame it on application erosion. Many organizations make common mistakes - like relying on "over the shoulder" training- that can dilute knowledge about system usage and functionality by up to 50 percent. And when your staff doesn't understand the full value of the system, they can't generate the full value of the system. How can you assure that your organization is getting the most out of your technology investments? We've got a list of the habits to avoid and the solutions that can help resolve application erosion.

One of the most important features of any software solution or business system is the value that you extract from it. No one can complain about getting better data in less time. However, over time, many organizations make common mistakes that contribute toward diminishing the value of their system. "Application erosion" can start the day you turn on any new system.

Why does application erosion happen? "The software doesn't change, it's the people." That's according to Olin Thompson, an author and former software executive who is frequently referred to as the "Father of Process ERP." Several years ago, Thompson met with a group of CIOs who all used the same ERP system. Each had observed that through time, the value of their systems had become less and less. "The system had not changed," says Thompson. "But the users were using less and less of the system for no apparent reason."

So, how can you assure that your organization is getting the most value out of your technology investments? The bottom line: understand how to avoid application erosion - or reverse it. And, experts on the subject, like Thompson, point to training as one of the best solutions.

Invest in Formal Training for New Users. More formal training programs for new users will help you avoid erosion. "The idea of formal training is sometimes hard to swallow for organizations," says Thompson. "I hear, 'I don't have a staff of 1,000. I have fourteen, and I can't justify the time and money for training one person.' With application erosion, you're going to pay the price sooner or later. There's hidden costs for not investing in training." If your budget is challenged, consider investing in a lower cost training option, such as an eCourse.

Consider Retraining Options. What percentage of your solution are you using? It might be time to consider retraining your existing users. The old saying "use it or lose it" applies to existing users who tend to forget about functions they don't use frequently. "These functions have value but many times a user will stop using them, or not use them correctly," says Thompson. "It's important to refresh your knowledge."

Avoid Over the Shoulder Learning. Some organizations will train one person well and expect that individual to teach others how to use the system. The risk, however, is that a person may be good at learning and getting concepts, but may not be well versed in learning theory or how to instruct, which means a higher risk of losing information. Additionally, over the shoulder learning usually doesn't occur within a closed learning environment. Distractions can get in the way.

"Even with the best intent, existing users teach only 70 to 80 percent of what they know," says Thompson. "That means the first generation's 100 percent of knowledge goes to 70 or 80 percent for the second generation and 49 to 64 percent for the third generation." When your staff doesn't understand the full value of the system, they cannot generate the full value of the system.

Implement a Training Plan. It's important to have a training plan. And with today's options, training doesn't have to mean time out of the office or travel expenses. Experts advise that if your organization has ten things to consider with a new implementation, training should be a seven or higher on the list, in terms of priority.

Without plans for avoiding or reversing application erosion, your organization risks not getting the full return on your investment. That can mean frustration later on. "Sometimes I'll hear, 'Why did we buy this?'" says Thompson. "The questions you *should* be asking are: 'What are the benefits I should have gotten out of this system? How else could I use the system?'" Reveal how you could get more out of your system, not if you need a new solution. "If you do nothing, application erosion will happen," says Thompson. "To prevent it you need a plan. If you suffer from it today, you need a plan to regain the value you once had."