Thinking Strategically about e-Engineering

By Richard Higgs, Managing Director of Strategic Thought Ltd, London's leading e-Engineering company

Ensuring you have made the right choice of technology consultancy is never easy. Will the consultancy consistently deliver solutions to support your business? Being confident the consultancy will consistently deliver solutions to support your business within an agreed timeframe and within budget is even harder. The words 'technology' and 'solutions' usually are not synonymous, except in a salesman's pitch.

For these reasons, since it's formation in 1987 Strategic Thought's objective has been to consistently deliver profitable solutions and services to meet the business requirements of our customers

As IT has become more critical to every company or agency that we do business with, we have undertaken three commitments:

- that we remain risk aware, to be alert to new risks and to monitor and target known risks

- that we maintain core competencies that support our long term position as the premier e-Engineering business

- that our solutions to business requirements must have:

  - re-useable components to enable certainty and lower costs over the agreed service level period, the best technology in-built to ensure longevity

  - a design to enable 'layered disposal and replacement'. This reflects the fact that we want the core of a system to last much longer than the outer skin, which may be placed every three months in certain markets

  - a return on investment that has taken into account the risks

Communication is Key

Over the years Strategic Thought has worked with clients on a wide range of projects across a number of different business sectors.

During this time we have built a reputation for working with clients to produce high quality, cost effective systems to meet their business processes. This reputation has been achieved by understanding communication and timeliness is of the utmost importance. Therefore before beginning any project great emphasis is placed on the following:

- what are the milestones of the business and how can deliverables be produced to meet these?

- early delivery of important parts of the system – do the hardest parts first, making sure that the business can see and quality results

- recognise that if you cannot deliver key components within 40 days (an e-Commerce year) then you and your enterprise are in trouble

The assessment of risk associated with delivery dates and how this should be dealt with remains critical. Above all the solution process must enable top down views into the risks. Many companies have operated on the basis that senior management should not be troubled by day to day risk management – fortunately the Turnbull report has put paid to that way of thinking in most organisations.

What is e-Engineering?

What do we mean by e-Engineering? Why have we chosen to make this our core competence for the future?

Firstly the background. Some time ago we identified that the key issues of businesses going to the Web were frequently misunderstood. Put crudely, senior business leaders felt that it was simply a case of browsers and new points of sale and IT leaders felt so much more could be achieved with this new technology if only the business could communicate it's future needs through effective process definition.

Strategic Thought believe that there are some excellent companies catering for various aspects of this "New World", however, our focus and commitment has become centred on the area just 'below the waterline'.

For some time companies have focussed on the need for resilience. For example Web site statistics are measured in numbers of 'hits' and 'uptime'. We take for granted that a Web site can be monitored and managed effectively. All of these points are areas of capability but they are not e-Engineering.

e-Engineering is:

- the empowering of the transactional systems of the business to deliver against new points of sale

- the ability of a business to change e-Commerce market position and brands without the need to change core systems

- the recognition that end to end processing is inappropriate and that a business must have:

- a transaction bus that links changeable business logic to transaction systems enabling rapid deployment of new services against legacy systems and processes

- the ability to think in 'blobs' of new businesses and utilise communication hubs for long term flexibility

- A flexibility of choice through good engineering. This is not just the ability to deliver products and e-Commerce businesses or customers but to be able to redefine where the business begins and ends, on a

- e-Engineering is therefore more than elegant architectures – it is a necessary mind set for business.

EMP-X Designed for Complex Computing Environments

EMP-X has been the 'Bedrock' of the successful build up of the right skills mindset and technologies behind our e-Engineering operation.

In the increasingly complex world of e-Commerce (where complexity is compounded by time constraints) the number of different products and layers of components needed for an overall solution often complicates many of the projects undertaken by Strategic Thought. In order to enable clients to take a strategic approach, we have evolved a range of skills branded EMP-X.

Enable – clients are enabled to re-utilise existing client server and mainframe systems. This provides the benefit of being able to develop both transaction bus and information bus capability across and beyond the business whilst maintaining and reusing existing database and application structures. Our chosen technology in this area is MQSI from IBM because of its fundamental strengths of transactional quality, the number of environments it spans and finally the long term investment that IBM is making in this area.

Migrate – migration can be from one application environment to another, from one database to another or simply an upgrade. In all cases the success comes from our database and data model recovery process.

Performance – by using a set of proven tools to provide significant performance increases to database systems clients can save on resources and costs.

Expert Development – Strategic Thought's experienced skills in development languages such as C, C++, VB, JAVA, ESQL, IDL and DCE are modelled to ensure the client retains intellectual property rights beyond the initial project so enabling them to be used again as required.

Professional Excellence

In order to ensure the highest quality standards and delivery on time, it is essential that the chosen technology consultancy employs staff of the highest quality with the widest range of experience, backgrounds and areas of expertise as possible.

In today's highly advanced business world, technical skills are often 'taken as read', what makes the difference is the ability to apply those skills in a controlled and yet changing environment. By working with experienced software engineers our clients have benefited as a result of our people's ability to resolve projects that encompass real degrees of technical difficulty. In these cases the success criteria frequently are based on effective management to identify and reduce the risk while providing cost-effective solutions to challenging problems. In addition senior managers at Strategic Thought are trained to be able to initiate, manage and control change to ensure professional excellence on behalf of our clients.

Successful Project Management

The measure of success for any organisation is the amount of repeat business from existing customers. Strategic Thought's ability to successfully manage fixed price, time and material related projects run in-house and on client sites means a high level of such repeat business. The use of proven, efficient processes is essential when managing a project of any type. It is therefore important to check what processes are in place before a project begins.

Quality Standards

In order to ensure major IT projects are managed to meet both time and budget targets it is necessary to adhere to quality standards. Strategic Thought have a strict regime that maintains the quality and standard of work. These quality standards can then be used in our clients' sites and there have been occasions when clients have gone on to implement these quality standards as their own using them as a set benchmark for future internal development projects.

Business Advantage in the Front Office

It is often the case that the majority of IT solutions and resources are focussed in the back office area of a business. However, it is usually the front office (client facing) areas which can give a business competitive advantage and therefore produce greater revenue and income. Strategic Thought recognise this fact and work with clients to ensure great efficiency where it counts most. By providing both component based applications, specific products – The Active Family of Application Products™ and bespoke development we meet the specific needs of customers with the minimum of fuss.

Maintaining Business Benefit

The increasing need to consolidate and integrate business functions has lead to the greater use of Intranets, Extranets and GroupWare. Simply by converting existing Microsoft Access databases SQL, Strategic Thought have helped many clients to preserve the business benefit of applications and then expanded their reach through making access to the system available via an Intranet, Extranet or GroupWare.

Active Risk Management as a Strategic Consideration

Recent studies have shown that major corporations and government departments are failing to consider the impact of risk and implementing risk management processes. By launching our Active Risk Manager™ product we have combined our expertise in the business processes for risk management with our technical skills to help organisations take an enterprise wide view of the risk faced by their business. Yet another way Strategic Thought can help clients think strategically about business objectives.

Staying with Support

Business objectives can and should change as the economic environment changes and therefore the need to support IT systems on which a business is based is essential. Here at Strategic Thought we take pride in the applications and business systems we write and therefore provide on-going support via telephone, modem and site visits as required. Once again this sets us apart in the complex world of IT consultancy and application development.

Here are just some of the areas where Strategic Thought Ltd have delivered and continue to deliver:

Banking

Equity and money market trading systems
Capital Market Systems
Foreign Exchange Trading Systems
Pension Fund Portfolio Management

Telecommunications

Bill and rating systems
Network device management
Subscriber management
Leasing systems

Strategic Thought Ltd also has significant experience in the following sectors:

Retail operations
Police service
Ministry of Defence
Local Government

Clients include:

Deutsche Morgan Grenfell
BNP Paribas
London Clearing House
Barclays
Eagle Star
Metropolitan Police
Essex Police
Vodafone
Spicers
Courts
Argos
Dixons

Conclusion

I hope you have enjoyed this insight into our business. As a business expanding at over 100% per annum it is vital that we engage new customers as well as keeping the ones we have. We believe that we have developed the right competencies to be the leading e-Engineering consultancy. Whilst this has much to do with our business focus and attitude it is well supported by our technical partners.

Our ethos and business is, at its heart a technical one. To this end we have to ensure that we only work with the best partners and technologies in providing solutions. Our focus in e-Engineering is centred on IBM given their on-going and expected long term market leadership in all aspects of technology to the Web. Our focus in the information systems that layer into this environment is Microsoft as we believe this is their key area of strength.

For more information on Strategic Thought please visit www.strategicthought.co.uk and for ARM visit www.arm-risk.com

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