

Legacy systems: when does it pay to upgrade?



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Contractors using older versions of software, referred to as “legacy systems”, typically maintain one of two stances on the subject. The first begins like this: “I don’t want to change. This works, so if it isn’t broken, why fix it?” On the flip side, there are those who take the other extreme: “We have to get off this old system and onto a Windows-based platform.” They say this with great urgency; however they can’t provide a sound business case for switching. Who is right?

To begin, let’s examine what defines a legacy system. This term refers to a software package that runs on a back-end system (e.g., UNIX) and has been written using a third-generation programming tool such as COBOL. One noticeable difference is the screen design. Legacy systems traditionally have a character-based “green screen” look rather than a graphical user interface (GUI), Windows-style screen. Legacy systems are also typified by non-database file structures with discreet files rather than the relational database structure usually found in true Windows programs.

Legacy vs. GUI: What’s the difference?

Legacy systems are not all bad; many have some distinct advantages. For instance, long-time data entry clerks become accustomed to using character screens and find that they can do large amounts of heads-down data entry quickly. They have gone through the process so many times, they just

The answer is probably sooner than you think

Checklist for Change

So when is it time to change? When you can answer “true” to any of the following questions:

- The old software is no longer supported.
- The old hardware is no longer supported.
- The old software can’t meet the reporting needs of the firm.
- People are spending too many hours per month on manual work outside of the system.
- The information needed to manage the business can’t be obtained from the software.
- You have found a new system that meets your functional needs and is based on sound database technology.
- You are prepared to invest in the infrastructure and training to obtain the increased productivity and reporting you need from a new system.

know it, automatically. For these people, help screens, on-line documentation and graphical user interfaces are not important issues.

On the other hand, some employees, such as new or infrequent users, tend to look at green screens like something right out of the dark ages. They appreciate the ease of navigation offered by the graphical look and enjoy the ability to use a mouse. Add the assistance offered by on-line documentation and you’ve got computer nirvana. These users want to switch immediately for the GUI look without concerning themselves about the underlying functionality or architecture.

In order to satisfy GUI needs, there are legacy systems that have added an overlay (sometimes called a screen scraper) that basically takes the char-

acter-driven green screens and repaints them to look graphical. These systems do not leverage the technological advantage of full client/server software; they just look prettier.

Furthermore, depending on the database they use, these overlay systems may or may not provide real access to the data that would help eliminate other legacy system drawbacks (e.g., not having the ability to easily pull out data for special reports).

Stay or change?

Someday everybody will move to GUI systems, relational databases and some type of client/server architecture simply because it will be impossible to buy software that isn’t graphical. Until then, how do you determine the right time to make the change? As soon as

you can make a business case for it.

More than ever before, today's companies are challenged to provide better, more accurate information quickly. State and federal reporting requirements are becoming more stringent. Owners require formatted invoices. Having date-sensitive information pullable when needed is important. Managers want to analyze their work in process and provide accurate and timely reports to banks and bonding companies. It is not always possible to do this easily with legacy systems. Many companies find themselves in the position of having "side systems," where users manually create reports to make up for the deficiencies in the old system. If your firm is in this mode, a shift to a client/server relational database system would be appropriate.

Relational database systems allow the users to extract data out into Crystal Reports, Microsoft Access or even Excel for reporting. This makes the data much more accessible and saves countless hours of manual

work. The database makes the data accessible and the tools make it much easier to obtain and manipulate. Figure out the time your staff spends on manual work and multiply it by a reasonable billing rate. It will quickly become apparent that there is big money to be saved by moving away from a legacy system.

Making the change

I recently overheard an office employee ask, "Why should we change the way we do things? Bob gets everything he wants from our system." In truth, Bob wasn't getting everything he wanted at all. Maybe it's time to go shopping.

Here are some things to keep in mind. Client/server software generally requires some investment in new hardware. Don't assume that because you currently have a network in place that it will be able to handle database and client/server applications. You may need a dedicated database server, especially if you are

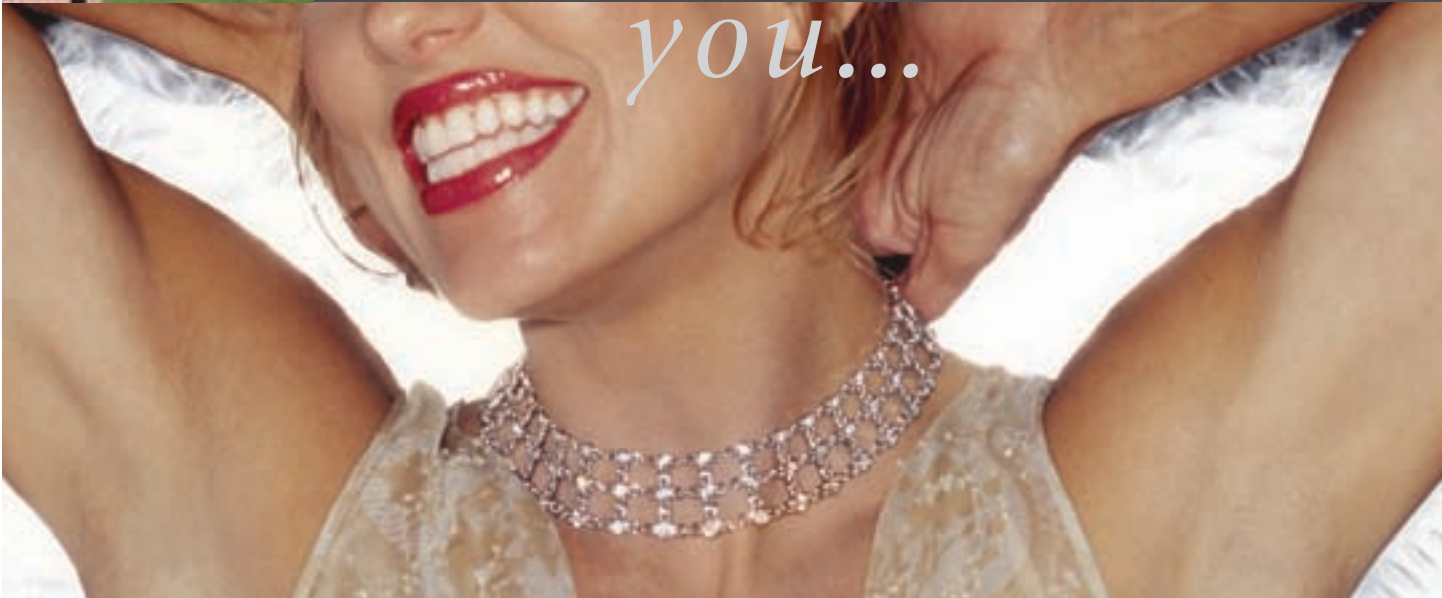
using any databases that could conflict with each other. You will also need to make sure your network and switches are running up to 100 megabits per second. In addition to the network, you will probably need to upgrade any PCs that are older than a couple of years. Give consideration to monitor size of these new machines. Finally, you need to make sure that the software you select can accommodate the users who are accustomed to character-based screens.

A last bit of advice: Don't expect to change software and continue to work exactly the same way you did on the old software. You need to learn the new system and adapt your procedures to take advantage of its capabilities to the fullest potential. **BXM**

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