Information Technology

Putting Skates on a Horse

We're surrounded by powerful hardware and software, ringed by fast networks, and have access to an inexhaustible information source – the Internet. So, why is it so hard to get anything accomplished? At a presentation I gave to the Rockland Business Association's Small Business Council in April, we discussed this question. Attendees cited inadequate training and hard-to-use software as obstacles. What else?

Most of the software sold with computers and in stores for personal computers is task-oriented, intended to help perform a specific function, like word processing, rather than solve a business problem or improve a business process. The result has been to turn computers into the world's fastest typewriters or calculators. I liken the process of automating inefficient processes to trying to build a car by putting skates on a horse.

In contrast, early computers were so expensive and limited that the business processes to be automated were carefully selected to yield maximum value. Some of that thinking survives today in the industry-specific software solutions seen in industries from law to car repair. Let's see if a process-oriented approach can help.

In the April session, we formed teams and had each team select a business process that's not working well, break it into steps, analyze the steps, identify where there are holes or weaknesses in the process, and look for ways to fix them. Once the flaws and possible improvements were defined, we could determine if information technology offers a solution.

Feeling as if your investment in technology isn't paying off? Maybe the problem isn't the gear itself, but that it's not being applied to the right problems in the right ways. First, analyze! Break the process down into steps. Look for "pain points" – bottlenecks, areas that always seem to fall behind or miss goals. Only when you understand the process can you improve it. Then look for improvements. Automating a poorly designed process is just putting skates on a horse.

This column by Denis Williamson of MacLamor Computer Consulting aims to help readers maximize the value of information technology. You can reach Denis at 845-357-1877 or denis@maclamor.com. Past columns are available by e-mailing Denis.