

Diversifying Your Technology

Unification.

For the last decade, the trend towards consolidating technology into a unified system has been hailed and sought after as the ideal for any entity or business. The marketing push for it has even filtered its way into our personal lives. After all, who wouldn't want all their data and networking and connections at your fingertips in one place?

Not only is this ideal impossible to achieve in the vast sea of technological offerings and solutions available to us—most of them indistinguishable from the other—it is also more volatile and vulnerable to widespread failure. It sounds like conflicting advice: Having everything under one proverbial roof is considered good, but symbolically having all your eggs in one basket is bad. Which is it? And what does that really mean for how a small city or water system utilizes technology?

The key to finding a balance is just that—balance. While the chaos of managing multiple pieces of technology can seem like duplicating

your efforts, the ability to have redundancy and backup processes is invaluable if one fails. Diversifying your technology is as smart as diversifying your assets or diversifying your income. Here's how:

1. Define your core missions

Many businesses develop a mission statement in order to align their staff with a common goal. However, so many mission statements are too vague and pretentious. You don't have to go to a lot of trouble to define them. Simply boil down what your staff sees as the main reasons why you exist and serve. For example, high on the list for water systems would be to provide clean drinking water. Listing several can be beneficial, as you will see below, so go ahead and name a few priorities.

2. Diversify your technology systems

Your technology systems consist of both software and the devices that contain them. Software would include solutions such as word processing programs, spreadsheet software, accounting services downloaded on your computer as well as any software as a service for which the city or water district purchases a subscription. Especially any software that has been customized for your specific purposes can be of need for diversification.

List out all software solutions your utility currently uses. Then list where those solutions happen to

“live,” for example, on a desktop in the office, on the operator's phone in an app, or even in the cloud with a subscription service.

If you have multiple devices accessing the same software with access to the same files, and each device equipped with multiple pieces of software, you are appropriately diversifying. While accessing multiple copies of the same data is too difficult to track, you should have backups of your data in different places. I suggest including online and offsite. In case of hardware failure or data loss, you have other ways to keep your systems working.



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Diversify your technology processes

Your processes consist of both workflows and the people who accomplish them. Workflows include activities or groups of tasks that lead to a common purpose, such as maintaining your Web site, monthly billing, or repairing leaks. Breaking down your workflow into smaller pieces can help you see which processes are core and which are non-core. Non-core activities, while helpful, are those that are not crucially connected to a core mission. If you are having trouble listing workflows, simply brainstorm all the tasks that are done over a period of a month. Then list annual tasks. Some smaller tasks can be combined into one workflow, depending on your preference. Make sure to determine if the workflow is core or non-core.

Next to each workflow, name the person responsible for accomplishing it. If you have multiple people for each core workflow, even if they hold the

DEVICE/LOCATION	SOFTWARE/APP	WORKFLOW/PURPOSE	STAFF MEMBER	CORE?
Office Desktop	MS Excel	Water loss report	Jane	Yes
iPhone#1	Twitter	News for Web site	Joe	No
iPhone#1	Twitter	Notify public of water boil or shutoff	Joe	Yes

same title or job position, then you are doing a better job of diversifying.

The result . . .

Combining your core missions, your systems, and your processes into one table, you can more readily see how your diversity stacks up. Specifically, you should have entries that overlap. For example, a core process should have multiple people accessing over more than one device. Non-core activities are not as crucial to diversify.

Using a variety of sources for technology can mitigate the impact of shocks affecting the productivity of individual sources in two ways: each source matters less, given the adage “Strength in numbers,” and in case of a disruption with one source, other sources can compensate.

Since change is so prevalent in the utility industries as well as the technology industry, adaptability is the key to maintaining the ability to serve your customers while dealing with changes and problems. Having your systems and processes diversified provides that stable flexibility without the chaos. So just maybe you can have all your eggs under one roof?

Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in Web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions.



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