



## Lost in Transition - How F&B Automation Fails

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There is no argument that moving to an automated club food and beverage management system has significant advantages – virtually every other foodservice environment has already done so. But unless these systems are properly implemented, they can easily fail to achieve the potential advantages. Over the 30 years I have been involved in automating club F&B operations, the single biggest problem is getting people to embrace change. Perhaps more than in most food service venues, people who work at private clubs seem to stay longer. In many clubs, I have met staff members who have been with the club for more than 20 years! Introducing a new system creates fear in many of these people, who are comfortable with the way they have been doing their job for many years. If proper focus and attention is not paid to the transition process for these people, they fight the new system and it can result in staff frustration and turnover and in some cases the failure of the system and loss of the associated investment in time and money.

Regardless of the cost of the system – from the simplest recipe system to the most complex and comprehensive integrated F&B management system – people are affected that may not be comfortable with change. Unfortunately, most software companies are focused on making the software sale and downplay the implementation and transition part. It's easy to tell simply by keeping track of how much time they spend talking about the software and comparing that with how much time they spend discussing implementation and transition. Likewise, many potential clients, whether they are general managers, chefs, controllers or IT directors focus on the pricing and features of the software. They spend most of their time looking at features and software demonstrations and in some cases don't even ask about implementation or transition – which is usually just fine with the software vendors.

### Changing the Culture

While people typically think of moving to an automated system as primarily about buying the right software, in most cases automating food and beverage operations causes a culture change. Implementing systems of this type can and should change the way business is done. Moving to an F&B system from a manual approach is unlike moving from manual accounting or guest check systems to automated systems that basically automate tasks already being performed manually. F&B systems introduce new tasks such as creating purchase orders, accepting vendor bids electronically, reconciling invoices and using requisitions and transfers. Most clubs do not perform these tasks at all. In some cases the F&B system can also involve integrating with accounting, POS and vendor ordering systems, and perhaps even redefining structures such as profit and cost centers. These improvements in business processes generally take less time and provide far better control than typical manual approaches, and can result in cost savings approaching 5-7% of total F&B sales! In other words, the culture change introduced by automating club F&B operations are responsible for huge cost savings, and are therefore not only desirable, but necessary in many cases.

Purchasers, chefs, accounting staff, receivers and managers are all affected by the changes, and may need to modify their daily routines to integrate the new approaches. Business flows are different and the reports produced by the system lead managers to focus on other aspects of the operation and make decisions differently. For many, these changes can be scary. Some will feel threatened by the new approaches, while others may feel the way they did it previously was superior. Accounting folks may be skeptical of the accuracy of the information and be reluctant to give up their spreadsheets. Chefs and purchasers may worry that ordering will be adversely affected causing out-of-stock conditions or damaging vendor relations.

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## Resistance to Change – a Natural Response

I can tell you from experience that without a strong focus on implementation and transition planning; even the best systems can fail, or take far longer than they should to fulfil the original objectives. Club boards and managers that focus on software features and pricing, placing more emphasis on the demo than the implementation plan are likely to learn a hard and perhaps expensive lesson. At the very least, they will be spending significant amounts of time doing things more than once, replacing staff or even starting over. I didn't anticipate this problem when I first started the company in 1980. Back then we sold software on diskettes in slipcase binders for \$199.00. We sold thousands of systems and I would bet that less than half of them were ever implemented, and of those, less than half were successful!

After learning that lesson, we started implementing the system by building the database and training users ourselves. The success rate was much improved – perhaps as high as 85-90%. But there were still a number of clients that ended up abandoning the system due to user complaints or inaccurate results. The reports were bad because the data was bad. The data was bad because people didn't do the collection and maintenance properly – either because the training didn't sink in, or because they wanted the system to fail so they could return to their old ways.

In short – the system was lost in transition. Most of the club managers I have come to know over the years are very good at managing people. They understand the need for effective communication and proper training. They also understand the built-in reluctance to change associated with every new project they try to implement. In some cases, that is the single hardest aspect of introducing new approaches, as I'm sure most of them would attest. Without the proper understanding and plan to help people deal with the changes, implementing an automated food and beverage system will be an uphill battle that could last a very long time.

### Getting Comfortable

It always seems to come down to comfort level. In order to convince people to do things differently, they need to be comfortable with the change. A well-developed transition plan that includes a combination of spoon-fed training, with little chunks at a time, followed by transition supervision and hand-holding is a requirement in my opinion. Users should be trained on only the parts of the system they need to know, keeping confusion to a minimum. They should also be allowed to practice what they learn before they have to do it in real life. It helps if they participate in the strategy sessions and implementation process as well, making them feel a part of the project. A little pride in ownership goes a long way in a situation like this. Showing them the anticipated result and how it will help them personally is also a key. And saving them time and/or relieving them of dull tasks like paperwork and filing provides something to look forward to.

The software vendor should already know these things and have a proven approach for successful implementation and transition. They have to be directly involved at every step, and that translates to a higher price point than systems you could buy with a credit card from a web site. The implementation talent and skill, not just the software, is the key to automating club F&B operations – perhaps more so with F&B than with any other aspect of the club's business. In my mind, clubs considering F&B automation need to ask software providers just as many questions about implementation and transition as they ask about features. Speak to other clubs they have implemented and ask about how the process went. Simply stated, be sure to gain the major advantages of automating F&B by focusing on the vendor's implementation approach and track record to avoid the possibility your system gets lost in transition!

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