



CRE Tech Talks

Episode #3: Keys for a Speedy & Successful Technology Implementation



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Scott: Thank you again for that warm introduction. Welcome to this episode of "CRE Tech Talks Podcast." Again, I'm your host, Scott Sidman.

Today's discussion focuses on the keys for a speedy and successful technology implementation. Most of the conversations in content that I see about CRE technology, and certainly what's usually found here and in another content that we produce, tends to focus on the providers and the technology itself, as well as the problems we're trying to solve.

We hardly spend any time discussing what's ultimately the most important, and that's using and realizing value from what you buy or in the case of other types of technology, license these days.

Fortunately, our guest today is especially well suited to discussing the keys to successful deployments and a host of related topics. Bill Greenhaus is a principal at REdirect Consulting and an expert in large scale and complex software deployments.

Welcome, Bill, and thank you for joining us.

Bill: Thank you, Scott. Glad to be here.

Scott: Great. Let's jump right in. Let's have you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background in both commercial real estate and consulting. Then, as you know from having listen to one of our podcasts, we also like to have our guests share something unique and unusual about themselves and their background.

Let's hear what you have to say.

Bill: I started in commercial real estate in 1985 when I took a job at a major New York commercial real estate firm. I guess, interestingly, it was probably among the very few real estate companies that was making any commitment to technology at that time beyond word processing. In fact, I think I introduced word processing when I got there.



That was a really terrific place to be, to learn commercial real estate. They really covered all aspects of it. They had a full service brokerage as well as third party property management. They owned commercial properties. They took care of everything in house so I got to learn the business from pretty much every side.

I ran IT there for about 10 years. Towards the end of that tenure, we found ourselves in the position of having to select and implement a new property management accounting system. We had to do it in a very tight timeframe. The existing software we were using was not going to be supported anymore. It was a service bureau type arrangement. Once it was done, it was done.

I became the internal project manager for that project. It was an incredible learning experience. I have to say it felt very high stakes. It was very long hours. I guess I had an epiphany of sorts because not long after we got that up and running, I decided there was a real need for technical consulting in that area for that particular software.

I had learned a lot about how to customize it, how to tweak it, how to make it work well for the particular needs of digital clients. I didn't see anybody else around that was doing that, so I went out and did that. That's pretty much how I got my start in consulting.

Scott: Great. You saw an opportunity and a niche and took advantage of it, a classic startup story. [laughs]

Bill: Exactly.

Scott: Anything on your background that you would like to share with us?

Bill: Unique or unusual?

Scott: Unique or unusual.

Bill: Let's see. I guess it's kind of corny, but I'm coming up on my 27th year of marriage to a woman that I met in the first grade, which I think is kind of unusual.

Scott: [laughs] That is. That's a great story right there.

Bill: Since I'm only 30, obviously we got married in the third grade.

Scott: [laughs] Clearly it didn't happen in New York. We won't delve too much into that. Terrific. Great, strong real estate background in New York, which is, in terms of real estate, kind of the crucible of where things happen. Terrific background and story. Tell us a little bit about REdirect, the services you provide for your clients, and how long you've been doing this.

Bill: How much time did you say we had?

Scott: [laughs]



Bill: I founded REdirect with a couple of my partners in 1999. I had been doing consulting as a sole proprietor for a few years. The demand for those services kept growing. The type, size, and complexity of the projects that I was asked to participate in also grew, so it became clear that I couldn't take that business as a sole proprietor. So, we formed REdirect. Our original core offerings at that time are still a big part of our business -- software selection, implementation. Data conversation was a specialty. Customization of software and certainly integrations, making different packages work together and exchange information.

From there, our portfolio service has continued to expand, particularly around, as we grew and as the projects grew, project management and process improvement. Now, real estate investment management is a big area for us. A lot of our big implementation projects now are in that space.

Several years ago, we created a help desk offering. We created that because we saw, again, a need. It's not a replacement for traditional vendor support. Our offering functions more like an in-house system department, how they would function at a large firm.

Internal resources that a lot of companies are not bringing in anymore, dedicated resources that know the business, know your environment, who can function and provide support beyond the scope of a specific software package, so it's really more of a dedicated, tailored support offering that has really been indispensable for our clients.

I just wanted to also mention that one of the most exciting things that happened just this year is that we branched out. We had been centered in New York but working on projects around the country. We have now opened a San Francisco office to support the western region, and that's really, really exciting for us.

Scott: I saw that. That's terrific. How many people are in the firm right now?

Bill: We are hiring, so I usually have to count them out and figure out how many there are, but I think we're about 25. That's 25 full time employees. We also have another 20 to 30 really trusted independents that we work with as needed that allow us to scale as needed. Obviously, this business is not always predictable. There are peaks and valleys, so we're able to bring people on to support the head team and scale up when we need to.

Scott: Sure. I think that's terrific growth and speaks to something we've been talking about a lot recently, which is the increasing reliance of commercial real estate firms on technology and the need for services like those that you provide. It's a great growth story.

Let's jump into the meat of this a little bit and start out by talking in some broad terms. Let's talk about the things people do wrong to begin with and some of the classic mistakes you see companies make -- maybe that you're called in to try and fix or that you're aware of -- when they make a decision to, again, purchase or license some new



technology and then begin the deployment process. Where do people get off on the wrong foot?

Bill: I guess it might sound a little self-serving, but I think one of the big mistakes companies make is to not bring in a consultant when they get started with the process. I think an independent consultant is important. Some companies go into this thinking they can do it themselves.

They're experts in their business and in real estate. They're not experts in the business of exploring technology. Usually we find, if they think that they can kind of do it on their own, that they don't understand what's involved.

Beyond that, I think one of the mistakes we see a lot is that there isn't sufficient buy-in from the top. I think in order for a project to really proceed from start to finish efficiently and thoroughly, you need to have somebody at the top who is understanding the need and is making it happen.

The other thing that happens is expectations have to be properly set, of course. It goes along, I guess, with having a consultant, but if you don't fully understand what's involved in the process and for the amount of time and commitment that it's going to take from internal resources in the business, it's not going to happen.

Very often we find that there's a tendency to bring in a project team without that filling their roles of the regular day job internally or just not providing sufficient resources. As a consultant, we can bring in all the resources in the world, but without that internal component, they're not going to get a good implementation.

Then I guess one other thing that comes to mind is that a lot of times people will try to bring in new software without really making the changes, the process changes that are required to work with the new software.

They want to do things the way they've always done. They want to grasp onto the status quo. They don't want to let outsiders lead the change, and without understanding that...once they understand that they can fully leverage the new system by optimizing that process and that work flow, things tend to go much better.

Scott: I think that's closely connected to the first point you made, which is the buy-in from the top. I would assume, then, the implication there is that if there's not that buy-in, the end users or the people who you rely on to get the deployment done, they just find reasons to avoid it or delay the implementation. Is that the result of that?

Bill: That could happen. What happens a lot is you'll have folks who, as mid level end users or middle management who are really committed to the project really anticipating the benefits.

If the top doesn't have that same vision, if senior management doesn't have that same vision, they're going to be changing priorities. They're not going to allow this to happen because they're going to have higher priorities. They're going to pull people away.



They're going to say oh, yeah, I know you're working on this project, but I've got this right now could you focus on this, please.

Scott: That makes sense. I think one of the things we always get asked when we begin a project in deploying of our application is people ask how long will it take. How do you answer something like that?

Bill: It's obviously not a one word answer. It's a difficult question because there are so many variables that go into that. Usually, until we get a certain amount of discovery done in the project, we won't have a good answer for that.

It depends, obviously, on the complexity of the project, what software you're implementing, how much of that software they're planning to implement, what software they're coming off of. All those things are factors.

Then, of course, there's the resource allocation. How much commitment are they making to putting internal resources on the project? There's no one size fits all. All our projects, in any one properly done implementation will be tailored specifically to the individual needs of that company.

It's something that we can certainly answer once we get a feel for the project and the company, the client. It's going to be somewhere in the range of 4 to 18 months. It could be a very wide range.

Another thing that people don't often take into consideration very much, and we have the experience now to realize it is a very, very important factor, is the business personality. Each client, each business has a different culture, different personality. Some companies like to spend a lot of time discussing each point. They'll have multiple meetings, bringing in stakeholders from all areas of the company. Things go a little slower.

I think it's a valid way to go, and sometimes it's the best way to go, but it's going to mean a longer time table.

Scott: I think just to clarify a little bit and provide some context for the audience, a lot of your implementations and deployments are focused on complex systems, like accounting platforms, ERD MRI for example, those things that involve heavy lifting.

Bill: Exactly, yeah. Our implementation methodology is flexible. It's very, very scalable. That's exactly what I was thinking of, a full core mission critical software platform that's being implemented. We do other types of implementations much more quickly on a simpler methodology.

Scott: If you could give us a road map a little bit of the major steps or stages in an implementation, could you break down the process a little bit?

Bill: I'd be happy to. Obviously, the beginning, the first part, as I mentioned in the previous question, is we have to gather the requirements. Sometimes that means a



separate, discrete discovery project, where we really take a deep dive into all areas of the business, really get under the hood and see what's going on.

If we don't do that, if we launch right into the implementation without a full discovery, there will still have to be a very detailed requirements gathering period in order to know what we're dealing with, what we're implementing, what the priorities are, what the specific challenges are going to be.

Again, there's no cookie cutter implementation, and these platforms are complex. Each implementation is unique. Once we have a good set of requirements, then we can really do a detailed planning and put together a project team and plan.

We can do a risk assessment of all the details that go into putting together a proper road map for the project. From there, I guess we would get into design. Design is a process where we take a client through what the software can do, what needs to be decided, what options need to be selected, what design elements are involved.

Hierarchies of entities, things like fair coding conventions. Also, design involves those things that need to be tailored for that business. It's just customizations that they need to accommodate something we are doing, those things are all planned out, designed in that phase.

After that, we have what we call a build phase and that's where we actually take that information, that design that's been worked out in the design phase and build it quickly, get the system up and running with that configured the way we designed it. Then critically, after the build phase, we do a pilot phase, it's where we do the testing, or where the client does the testing.

That's really, really, really important, I guess it goes without saying, but you don't really see what you designed until you get your opportunity to pilot it. That's when it's no longer abstract, and you have to really take the system through its paces to ensure that, A, what's been built conforms to the drive that we put down, and also that design and those decisions were the correct ones.

That's very important. Once we have a good pilot, we've successfully piloted all the processes that need to be piloted in order to be comfortable that you will be able to run the business, then we get into deployment. The deployment phase is where we actually, if there's a data conversion, we would do the final data, complete the final cut of data from the old system and convert it, do a data validation, train the users, and then plan how we'll actually roll out that system. I guess I don't mean planning, in the sense that planning for the deployment instead of the planning phase, but rolling out the deployment involves getting people trained and started.

That's it. We go live, and we don't really end it there. All our projects, we built into the plan a stabilization period because it's going to be difficult no matter how far and well done the implementation is. There's going to be a difficult few weeks when people start



to adjust to the new turning platform, and we like to be there to hold hands and help them get through that period.

Scott: Right. That makes sense. It sounds like a really well-organized my systematic process. My assumption is that if you follow these stages correctly, you get the right level of engagement that the ultimate result is, you that the utilization you are hoping for, and that's the key to everything, right?

Bill: That's correct. Exactly, both in terms of adopting the systems the way it was designed and intended, and how well utilized the system itself is. It's taking the best advantage of what the system offers, and very often, we limit that first implementation, what we would call phase one, to simply replacing the functionality of the previous system.

In other words, take them back to the baseline with the new system, which usually means they're already going to gain quite a bit because they are on a legacy system that doesn't have the inherent features of the UI of the new system. Those features will benefit them right off the bat, but some of the more advanced features causing flex in that system, we would hold off on that until the second phase.

It's really a lot of change all at once, so we want to get them stable, and make sure the business is running smoothly on the new platform. Then you come back for phase two, and begin implementing those more advanced features.

Scott: Right. You mentioned earlier about the importance of executive buy-in. That relates to my next question, and something that you talked about as well, in terms of the project team. Obviously, on the client side of this, their biggest challenge is always time, and getting resources, mindshare and attention. What do you require of people on the client side, and how do you mitigate the amount of time that you have available and manage that?

Bill: It's a very important part of our planning process, and it varies, obviously from company to company. We always like to take into consideration what the client roles are of the people that need to be involved in the project on every level, and also we like to factor in any business contingencies. Planning and acquisition that's going to require extra time from all of these people, how does that affect the overall plan?

But by and large, we will need at least a heavy commitment from one internal person, one staff member that would function as the internal project manager. That one gatekeeper for all the things that are going on in the project. We will also need a fair amount of time commitment from those folks who are the decision-makers, and the ones who know each area of the business and their deployment the best.

There will be a certain amount of involvement from a wider group of people, as decisions are made, and we would want to bring them to get some other input and feedback on what we've been doing and what's happening. It's funny, sometimes you



talk to the head of a department, who knows everything that's going on at the department.

They know how the process flows, they know how the work is supposed to get done, but sometimes there's things happening that they don't really know about, and you find out more when you dig deeper. I think we need a fair amount of commitment from every level.

Scott: Sure, particularly with the types of projects that you have, it's tough to do a completely on your own, so you need their involvement.

Let's talk about the training aspect a little bit. You talked about of the little bit in terms of the implementation deployment plan, so ways you train people initially, and then how do you account for continuous training? Once you are up and running, how do you guys help with that?

Bill: Of course, the project won't succeed if people don't use it. The training begins towards the beginning of the project, when we have to educate the project team itself. They're going to be called upon to make decisions, they're going to be called upon to look at the way their business will run on the new system and they'll have to have a decent background and what the capability is.

We do training at that level, the higher level training. It's not focused on how to post a badge, it's more focused on the higher level of functioning of the system.

Then, when we get to the user training, in the deployment phase, we do a very tailored training. If the training is some sort of generic, scripted training, it's certainly not going to be the most effective for that particular client. So, we work into the training any specific design elements that were done a certain way to address certain problems you need to that business.

We try to keep the agenda, do it in small chunks. Don't do too big a group, it's important that it's hands on, and we do some remote training. Generally speaking, sometimes with follow-up training, if we remotely believe it will be cost-effective on site.

We do that, and then we always recommend having customized training guides, which we provide so that it's almost like a combination of policies and procedures with the credits training and user guides that a vendor might provide. As we get to know the company and what their needs are, and how the system is being designed and built, we can incorporate that into training guides.

For continuous training, we think that it's very helpful for folks to adequately do some refresher training. Even if they've been on the system, they start doing something, develop certain habits, doing things a certain way to...Over time, they forget why they were doing that, and was the other way to take care of that.

But for general, continuous training, we often use a train the trainer approach where we make sure there is value internally. There are experts on the subject matter and system



experts who can take the training role for new people. Along with the training guides, we also have produced other tools that people can use, quick cards and things that just help people stay on top of where to point and click, basically.

Scott: Right. I think that's one of the things we learned, as well, that we have to provide a variety of options because people consume information and learn differently. I think that's the key, so some people love to read guides, some people like video, or some people just like conversations. It's something you need to address.

Bill: Right. It's really interesting to see how differently different people learn, but I think by and large, the training itself, people don't really learn it until they use it, so that's why we find that civilization period so important. That's the real training.

Scott: Yeah, that makes perfect sense. you mentioned earlier, you talked a little bit about integrations at the beginning when you are describing some of the services that you provide. Have you seen more requests for those, are they becoming more important as technology takes on a larger role with your clients?

Bill: Yes, I think they're absolutely critical with a number of different types of applications that are being developed. There are some software vendors who are providing, or building that single stack to provide everything in a one stop shop. But in general, to have best of breed solutions in different areas, you really need to have to be able to select the right application for the right function and to be able to integrate there. There are some challenges with that, of course. Sometimes now everything tends to be cloud based, but I think the integrations are becoming more capable because of vendors giving out APIs.

Scott: Yeah, that sort of transitions into another question I have, which was the impact of things, particularly with the newer software applications where they're mobile, they're cloud based, there's a social component to them. In addition to the impact on integrations, any other things you see, in terms of the work that you're doing, where there's an impact of those?

Bill: Yeah, I guess the biggest impact for us, you can certainly see that real estate has been traditionally very slow to embrace technology. Sometimes over the 15 years or so that REdirect has been around, it's not always been clear to the stakeholders, our clients, why they need to do an implementation or adopt new software or technology. That's changing. I think that's beginning to change at an accelerating rate.

I think it has to do, in part, with the younger generation in leadership positions in these companies but possibly more so to the fact that everybody has this connected social media personal experience, consumer experience.

Now, they're getting a comfort level with that that they didn't have before. I think it used to be a really, especially, I think, probably mostly in New York, a big point of contention when you'd talk with a real estate owner about hosting their database anywhere but



their site because they felt that there was a level of not willing to trust another provider to host their database.

All that kind of thing is changing, I think largely due to the fact that we all walk around with smart phones with every manner of applications connected to everything we do.

Scott: Bill, I think you provided the audience with a tremendous amount of things to think about and some good guidelines.

Maybe in conclusion you can summarize those, kind of five key takeaways, three to five takeaways, that you would advise any commercial real estate executive or organization to think about with regards to deployment and implementation issues, things that they should think about.

Bill: OK, that's great. I don't know if it's exactly five. I think the first thing I would say is go back to what I started with, which, again, may seem self-serving, but I think it's good advice. Bring consultants in early. If you're doing software selection, it's probably best to have a consultant with you through that process.

If you know the software already, bring a consultant in before the vendor or during the time you're working out the deal with the vendor, the consultant, first of all, helps you understand what's being proposed by the vendor. Very often, we find that we can help clients get the best deal for themselves.

Then I think the other thing that is really important is education. You have to know what your needs are because sometimes we go in to do some initial inquiries, some fairly basic questions, and people don't really have the answer at their fingertips about their own business and how things run.

The makeup of the whole portfolio, I think it's important to get that clear, get some clarity around what your needs are. Why are you changing software systems? What's driving that change?

Then I would say a great way to get educated is through conferences. Go to the conferences. Go to Realcom, go to the CFO forums, software vendor events. There are all kinds of networking events and user groups, LinkedIn groups.

Don't underestimate social media as a source for getting information. That's where you get the consumer view of what really works. Don't rely on vendor demos alone. I don't know if that was five.

Scott: I think it was pretty close. That was great. Terrific advice. Thank you, again, for all of the great insights. I think you provided a lot of things that people don't, as I mentioned at the beginning, consider as part of the overall evaluation process.

It seems to be an afterthought in many cases. I think getting ahead of this is really important for any company considering a new technology, a new platform. Again, you're a great resource for those folks as well.



Contact information for Bill and REdirect Consulting will be available on our podcast page. I encourage you to reach out to him with any questions you might have. We have a longstanding relationship and experience working with REdirect. Terrific company, great group of people.

I encourage you, if you do have questions, particularly for large scale deployments but anything you might be thinking about, to reach out to them.

I want to thank you for joining us on this episode of CRE Tech Talks. I hope you continue to listen in. Thank you.