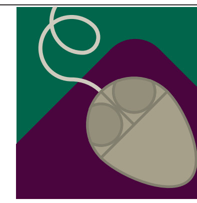

Get Real!

by Jo Day and Kevin Day

> “If you neglect to account for the entrepreneurial psyche in your process, any technology “solution” is doomed to failure.”

In this article, we'll cover a hot button for most financial planning firms: a topic we call “Get Real!” Of the technology topics we speak about to planners around the country, we find this one to be not only dead-on accurate, but humorously so. This topic garners the most nods, smiles and outright laughter from listeners.

Before we begin our story, let's introduce some of the key players and assumptions.

Martin is the owner of We Manage Assets Inc. (WMA), and has been in the business for over a decade. Martin embodies the true entrepreneurial spirit of “herding cats” fame. Martin thrives on change, loves complexity and new challenges (not just any challenge, but new challenges) and hates doing the same thing twice. It's not unusual for his staff to hear him say something like, “Retirement planning for cowboy émigrés from Switzerland—I've never done that before—sounds like fun!”

While Martin routinely comes up with new ideas, his love of change and complexity sometimes drives his staff crazy.

Jennifer (in training for her CFP certification) and David (Martin's assistant) each have been at the firm for three years. Both are detail-oriented and thrive on checklists. They want to know what they need to do, when to do it and when they are finished.

Do you see any source of potential conflict here? (Hint: this is foreshadowing.)

As key staff members, David and Jennifer often are responsible for implementing Martin's ideas. Because they are “checklist” people, they create a process and expect everyone to follow it. What happens if they do not account for the differences between themselves and the entrepreneur?

1. Martin, as an entrepreneur, by his very nature will not follow the process.
2. The rest of the staff looks to the entrepreneur as a leader. They see that Martin is not following the process and wonder why they should.
3. The process fails.

The ‘Get Real’ Principle

A few rounds of this and the staff's motivation begins to dwindle. So, what do you do about it? Let's compare what Martin's firm would typically do, versus what they *should* do if they practiced the “Get Real” principle.

WMA has 300 clients and 6 employees. If there were one thing Martin would like to do to improve client service, it would be to prevent things from falling through the cracks.

While attending a planning conference, Martin sees a demo of a contact management software application. With this software, his firm will be able to link actions to clients, and everyone in the firm will be able to easily track outstanding to-do's. It's the answer to his prayers! Right?

Get real!

Is Martin *really* going to sit in front of his computer after a client meeting and diligently type in outstanding actions linked to the (correct) client record? He might agree to do it, and he might intend to do it, but let's be honest: he's our “never-do-the-same-thing-twice” entrepreneur. Martin's implementation will be spotty at best, and if he's lucky, last for an entire week.

What's the real problem here? Is it that Martin is not a detail-oriented person? Absolutely not! The fact that Martin is not a follow-through person is not a weakness, but an incredible asset to WMA. Martin's creative energy, vision and new ideas drive the success of the firm and its future direction.

Remove the Entrepreneur

The real problem is that Martin has the wrong mindset. He thinks technology is the solution to solving his client service issue, when in reality there is no such thing as a software solution.

So, what can WMA do to ensure that they successfully use their new software application to prevent things from falling through the cracks?

It's simple: **take the entrepreneur out of the process.** Let's see how…

As soon as Martin finishes with one client meeting, he is on to the next thing—returning phone calls, answering e-mails and questions from his staff. We're going to help Martin (and his short-term memory) by giving him a digital recorder. Immediately following each client or phone meeting, Martin refers to the notes he scratches down on his legal pad and does a "data dump" into his new, slim recorder. Specifically, he records the client's name, what was discussed, actions for WMA and actions for the client.

Once a day, Martin gives his recorder to someone to transcribe and add actions to the contact management software. This ensures his actions get captured. Right?

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How likely is it that Martin will consistently give his recorder to a typist each day? If you are thinking "not very," give yourself a point—you are catching on. Remember, Martin is not the follow-through person in the firm, but David is. That's why David should assume the responsibility to track down Martin's recorder each day, download the recorded actions and return it promptly to Martin.

While it is unreasonable to expect Martin to turn in his recorder every day, it is very likely that Martin will take 60 seconds after each meeting to unload his memory. Why? It relieves him of the burden of trying to remember what he needs to do. Plus, it's a fast and easy task.

Problem solved, right?

Get real!

Does David really have time to type meeting debriefs every day? Chances are that he does not. But Jennifer's high-school-age son, Chad, who types 50 WPM, is looking for part-time work.

WMA hires Chad to type up Martin's debriefs every day. Once Chad is finished with his typing, David (who has more in-depth knowledge of work flow in the firm) assigns debrief actions to the appropriate people. This process could be further improved with voice recognition software.

"Is Martin really going to sit in front of his computer after a client meeting and diligently type in outstanding actions linked to the (correct) client record?"

Not the End of the Story

So, now that client actions are being captured and tracked—end of story—right?

Get real!

How does WMA ensure that assigned actions are actually being completed? To ensure that action items are truly being performed, Jennifer runs a weekly client report that shows which actions are still outstanding, who they are assigned to and how many days they've been in the queue. This report is reviewed during weekly operations meetings in the firm, and work flow is adjusted and prioritized accordingly.

What has happened here? WMA is still using their technology tools, but by accounting for the differences in participants' personalities, the outcome (success) is entirely different. Now, they…

- Ensure actions are captured, assigned quickly and completed in a timely manner
- Increase value to the client
- Create a process in which the entrepreneur can work

Does this story have any bearing on technology? Absolutely, and it's simply this (as eloquently put by a planner we know): "It's not the software, but how you implement it." If you neglect to account for the entrepreneurial psyche in your process, any technology "solution" is doomed to failure.

The next time you are tempted to solve a problem in your firm using technology alone, use the principles we've outlined above with your staff. "Get real," and you'll get success!

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