



# Alternative Technologies

## Enterprise Integrity: Selling Solutions

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Over the last few years I've become increasingly disturbed by the software sales approach of some vendors. The marketing strategy at its root is called "solution selling" and I hope you'll hear me out on this. Most businesses want products that solve business problems rather than just "cool" technology. My heartburn is with a now rampant perversion of this marketing strategy, and its cancerous consequences. I call it "solution scamming."

Most readers will not need to be reminded that the success rates for enterprise software projects, whether defined in terms of being on time and on budget, meeting user expectations, or having a positive return on investment, are notoriously low. It's a disease we battle constantly. Part of the reason for these low success rates has been an unwarranted love affair with information technology for information technology's sake, rather than selective acquisition of appropriate technology assets. Technology has been so successful for the last two decades that many in the corporate world have come to be *technology materialists*. A technology materialist is a kind of closet utopian, implicitly believing that almost all problems can be solved if enough of the newest, greatest technology is at their disposal. An absurd proposition on its face, most of us have been guilty of embracing it at one time or another as when, for example, we just had to have that new "gadget" (cell phone, PDA, DVD player, etc.).

One strategy in the battle to control technology expenditures has been to define specific business problems more carefully and then to purchase "solutions" to address those problems. A "solution" is a set of products and services that together solve a business problem. By this reasoning, technology is merely a component of the purchase – a means to an end. This attitude forces us to understand, and stay focused on, a product's intended business use (i.e., solving the business problem) and, presumably, precludes our getting caught up in all its wonderful details just because they are interesting. (Identifying this focus is a good reason to have business analysts around: Their expertise is capturing business requirements.) Presumably vendors have been forced to sell "whole product" including enabling services as well as goods. So, fair enough.

The problem is that some vendor marketing departments have realized they can use the mantra of "solution selling" to hide a multitude of technical sins and scam you. Don't ask technical questions, they say. Just determine whether or not their product delivers the required

functionality and whether other customers have been successful using it. But it's not enough to know that other customers have solved a problem similar to your own. It's very hard to know just how similar those other customers are to you or their problems to yours, or if they use the product in ways you can. A lot of technical skill is required to identify the technical aspects of a business solution, and whether or not a product can deliver them. Even more skill is required to identify a technical solution with staying power, let alone compare multiple products, and yet more skill to compare the compatibility of the business and technical requirements of two companies. All manner of "solution" waving by some vendor just doesn't alleviate risk!

Business people cannot foresee the next set of tactical business problems. That's the job of strategists, enterprise architects, CIOs, and CTOs. And it's why *real* business astute technology consultants (and industry analysts) are needed for technology analysis and evaluation. It's our mandate to recommend technology infrastructure that will last beyond the immediate set of business problems based on solid *principles*. Too bad so many have forgotten this mandate and, at best, strive for defensible technology purchases – focusing on forthcoming standards, technical trends, and the like – as if popular trend predictions foreshadowed success.

Technical understanding is critical. Comparative analysis of technology products requires detailed knowledge of internals. Without it, it's impossible to know if the technology will be sustainable – scalable in terms of load and performance, portable, interoperable, and functionally competitive, or if it will deliver a cost effective business solution. True, some analysts burrow into the weeds unnecessarily, but that does not prove that examining the details is unnecessary. The answer is to make the details more readily apparent and to provide better training in how to evaluate and compare technical products in the context of business requirements. Until that happens, remember: "Solution scamming" just doesn't deliver solutions with *enterprise integrity*.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Mc Govern". The signature is written in dark ink and is centered horizontally on the page.