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OWNERS' MANUAL | Jeff Haden   Dec 1, 2011

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If contrarians can be defined as people who reject the majority opinion, Klick, a Toronto-based digital marketing agency that made the Technology Fast 500 list for the third year in a row, is a great example.

Why? Klick doesn't use email internally.

"In the very early days of Klick we started to recognize some basic challenges with email and wanted to find a better solution," says Klick CEO Leerom Segal. "While email makes for a decent communication tool with clients, internally it doesn't facilitate collaboration and basic workflow. Email has no intelligent mechanisms for prioritization, lacks context, lacks a framework for knowledge management, and saps accountability."

As Klick grew and the number of disciplines required for every project increased, basic commitments were increasingly more difficult to manage.

"We've all been on an e-mail thread where people are answering questions but really just creating more confusion," Segal says, "or maybe referencing some missing yet critical attachment. So we looked for tools to help us better manage our basic workflow."

Klick started by trying testing systems that managed basic work units. Using a work ticket, one individual clearly articulated a need, assigned it to another person, and included all relevant information. When the task was completed the ticket was routed back to the originator for verification.

Aaron Goldstein, Klick's Chief Operating Officer, quickly recognized that work tickets could create the necessary level of accountability while overcoming two of the biggest weaknesses of email: Knowledge can get lost in a person's mailbox and prioritization is basically nonexistent since inboxes assume that most recent equals most important.

But existing systems were far from perfect. "We found major problems with conventional work ticket systems," Goldstein says. "And we were afraid of the impact on our culture, since there was little consideration for usability and adoption. The systems we explored all seemed unnecessarily bureaucratic. We want people to drive systems, not systems to drive people."

So Klick decided to build their own workflow management system, one that would preserve the company's culture and create a strategic advantage. The system is called "Genome," and according to Segal has become an essential part of Klick's identity.

"Our initial goal was to ensure that Genome was adopted naturally," Segal says, "so we experimented with every team member's suggestions: trying different interfaces, different mandatory fields, even different prioritization algorithms. We wanted our employees to *want* to use the system, so everything it did had to save them time and effort. Then, once we developed a habit of incrementally improving the platform, Genome started to evolve in ways we never imagined."

One early insight was that evaluating the patterns work tickets took, in aggregate, could accurately predict project success and schedule integrity, a competitive advantage that has helped revenues triple over the past five years.

"It didn't take long for us to recognize the potential and start to investigate additional ways to keep everybody on our team as forward-looking as possible," Goldstein says.

"By moving away from internal email and creating a system that truly supports our employees, we do a better job of separating signal from noise so our organization can make small course corrections earlier in the process," he adds. "We don't want to remove emotion or the human side from decision-making, but we do want our team to make decisions that are always informed by data."

"And it all started because we weren't satisfied with email. The fact most people use a tool doesn't necessarily mean it's the best tool to use."

Jeff Haden learned much of what he knows about business and technology as he worked his way up in the manufacturing industry. Everything else he picks up from ghostwriting books for some of the smartest leaders he knows in business. @jeff_haden

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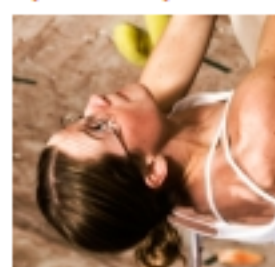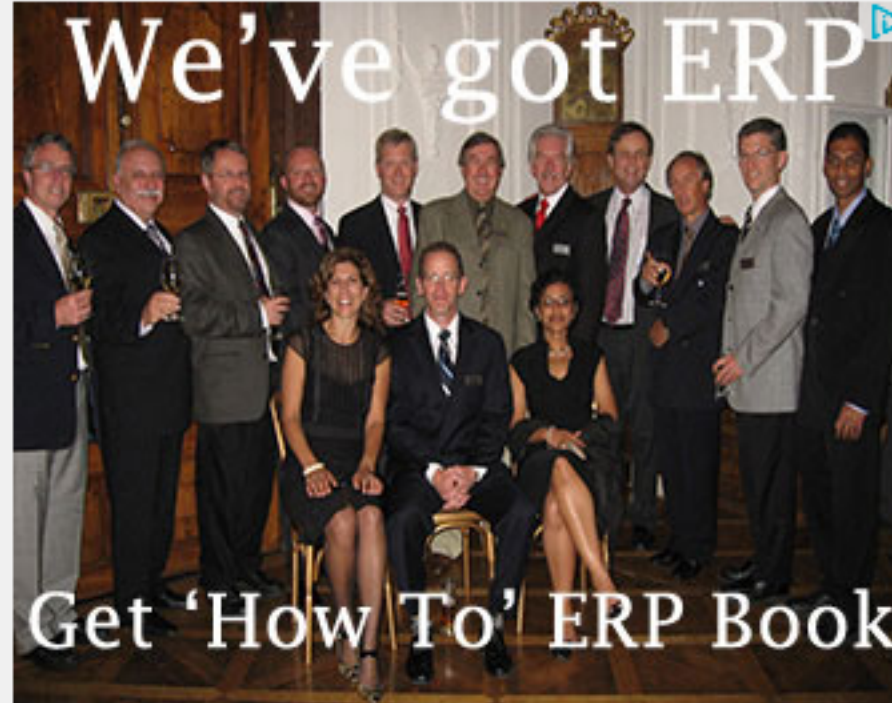The co-founder of a Brooklyn gourmet food and wine shop knew first-hand the shortcomings of his cash register software. So he invented a new one. Watch video

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