Ensuring good returns on investment when deploying new technologies

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Technology projects have a habit of going sour. It has been reported that IT projects may be 20 times more likely to run out of control than other business projects. In some cases companies have been brought to their knees by IT project failures. There have also been numerous high cost, high profile public sector projects that have had to be cancelled or suffered significant cost overruns.

Fortunately schools are different. Or are they? I doubt there is a school in the country that does not have some hardware, software or a content resource that has been paid for and is still in its box or yet to be used. Then there are resources that might get used occasionally, but nowhere near as much as they could or those that are being used, but are failing to have the impact that they are capable of. Add up all that waste across the education sector and I suspect that the aggregate figure could be somewhat eye-watering.

For me the lost opportunity cost is at least as bad as any squandering of money. Just what could have been achieved educationally if the full potential of all those under-performing assets had been realised?

So how can we implement new technologies more effectively, achieving greater educational impact? At the core lies professional development. For most technology deployments the professional practice of individual teachers has to change in order for there to be significant impact on learning. And this has to happen against a backdrop of many competing priorities, where there is often little training and very rarely any time given to assimilate new skills and adapt existing practice.

However, the process of introducing a new technology into a school involves a number of stages and, like a chain, a significant weakness in any one link can lead to the failure of the whole.

The beating heart of any education ICT deployment should be the set of desired outcomes. This defines why you are undertaking the project; it is your raison d'etre and it is against this that the eventual success or failure will be measured. Where school leadership is strategic then it is probable that the desired outcomes were born out of the school's educational vision, the institution's raison d'etre.

In reality, the beating heart of many ICT deployments is a purchasing decision. I wonder how many schools' current ICT vision is "We want iPads"? For some, the vision may not extend much beyond the desire to purchase particular devices. Other people have them, good things are being said about them and we want them. In other cases there may be desired objectives in buying tablet computers, but unless these objectives are well thought out and communicated, planned for and managed for, then the project outcomes are likely to disappoint.

When money is spent on educational technology there is a sharp divide between buying "stuff" and providing training and support. At best the latter gets squeezed, at worst it is left out all together. Sparkling new hardware is tangible, it can be counted and shown to people. It is clear evidence of intent. It can appear in plans where targets can be set, measured with ease and ticked off. This is reflected at the highest level where Government programmes
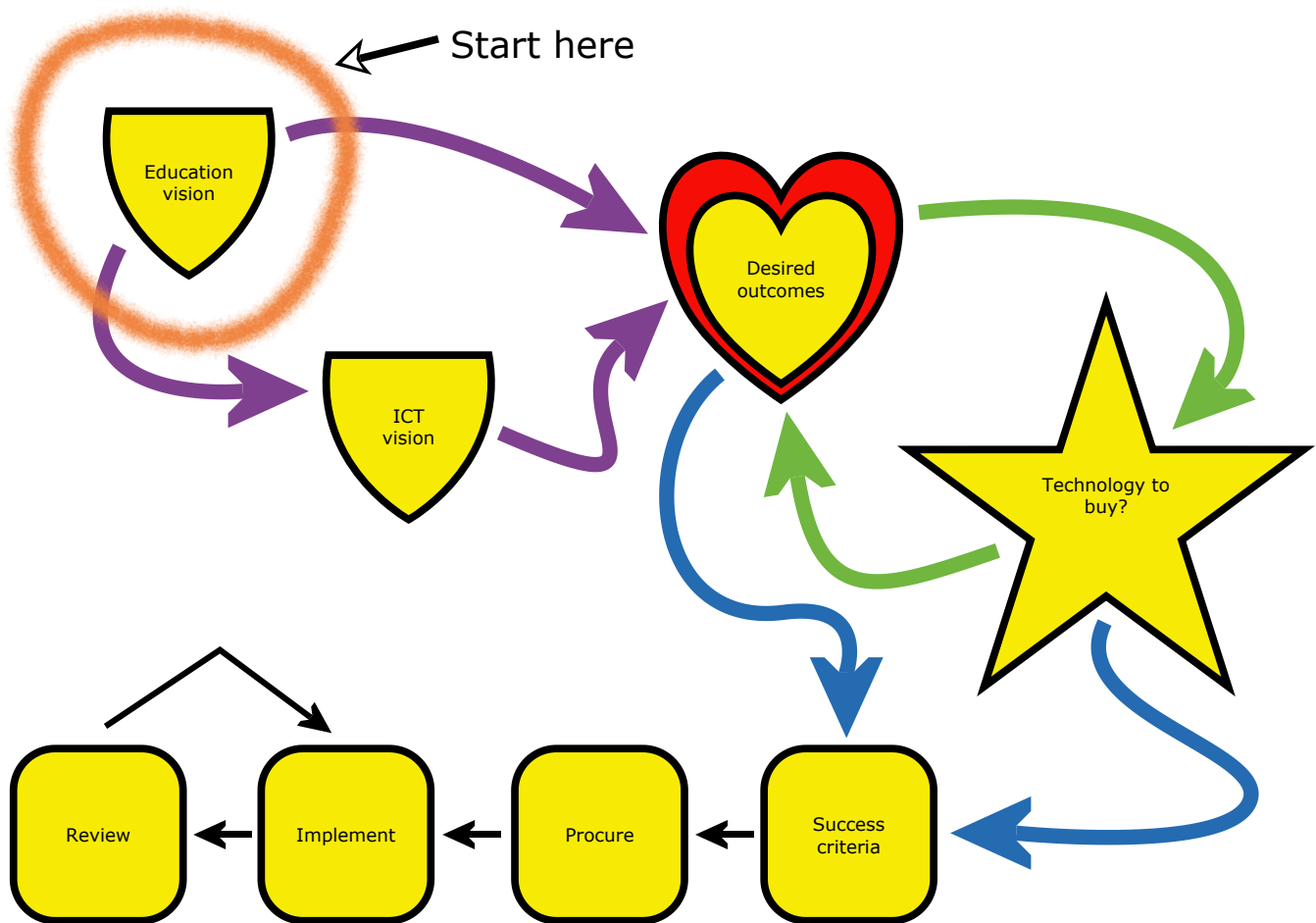
may cover the purchase of hardware and software with nothing for training and support beyond an initial pilot. Training and support is generally invisible, is difficult to evaluate and not always successful. Yet without it, the majority of projects are doomed to under-perform, or even fail outright.

Having a clear set of desired objectives and developing this into success criteria becomes especially important once a technology deployment begins. These are what the project leads need to monitor, assess and when necessary, take appropriate action over. If you are achieving above expectations, do you need to re-evaluate your goals and set them higher? What more might the project deliver? If you are achieving below expectations are there actions you can take to try and turn things around?

To maximise your chances of success when deploying new technologies, I suggest that you need the following.
  ➢ A well established and clearly understood institutional vision
  ➢ A clear set of desired outcomes that support that vision, developed into success criteria, which become the focus of the project
  ➢ Effective professional development planning
  ➢ Active management of the project outcomes

For me, these bullet points represent "management for success".

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