

The CIO guide to successful restaurant tech investments



With 28 years of experience in the restaurant industry, veteran CIO Leon DeWet has seen his fair share of IT projects. During his career as a CIO he was responsible for selecting and implementing technology for large F&B enterprises, including national chains like Cracker Barrel and O'Charley's.

A series of challenging months have taught the restaurant industry that **speed and agility are imperative for survival.**

Restaurants need to be able to adopt new models of food delivery, quickly. They must be able to make staffing changes at the last minute. They must substitute ingredients and change dishes depending on what's available, and update menu information wherever needed. They need to track costs in real time and optimize purchasing while factoring in limited seating, reduced opening hours, and consumer habits that change month to month.

To achieve all this, restaurants require an **innovation mindset**, where the focus is on possibilities ("what our brand can be") instead of the traditional ("what our brand is"). They need **technology** that empowers them to experiment, transform quickly, and achieve their goals.

Restaurant businesses that are still operating on legacy technology must urgently move to modern platforms. However, that's often easier said than done, even when the enterprise is aligned and willing to transform. From fear of failure, to inability to reach a consensus on priorities, to lack of coordination, **too many technology projects never make it beyond the drawing board.**

Here are DeWet's 7 tips on how to make tech investments that drive returns.

1. **Start by defining success**
2. **Vendor selection: look for proven industry knowledge**
3. **Vendor selection: consider the culture**
4. **Invest in a proof of concept**
5. **Fill your team with project champions**
6. **Prepare in advance for staffing changes**
7. **See technology as a strategic investment**

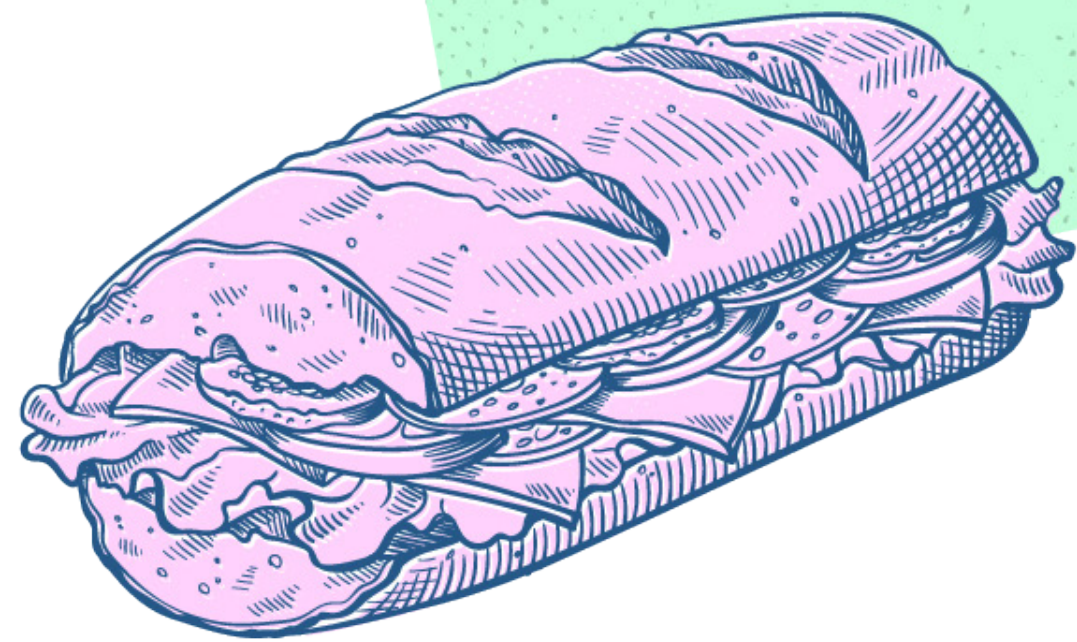


1 Start by defining success

“Before you even start your project, make sure that everyone in the company is on the same page in regards to what the goals are, and **what you would define as project success**. It is a common misunderstanding to assume that success has to be synonymous with financial results. Depending on the project scope, or even on the specific phase of each project, **success can take on different meanings**.

For example, a test pilot may be deemed successful if it helps you understand what you need, what works, and what you should avoid. In this case, success equates with **learning**.

Before you move on with your project, take a moment to map out the phases of the project. Set out goals for each of them (“this phase will be considered successful if...”), and ensure that all stakeholders are aligned with the plan.”



2 Vendor selection: look for proven industry knowledge

“If you are trying to replace a mission-critical system, for example your point of sale or ERP system, it pays off to play it safe, and look at **established vendors** in the industry. The ideal vendor will have products that have proved their worth, quality service, and a **track record in the restaurant industry**. In other words, you must find a vendor that can show they have done it before, and who will be there for you in the long term.

During the research phase, don't be afraid to ask questions to see how well the vendor understands your daily processes and business challenges. These are the people who'll be giving you practical advice: they need to have **deep understanding of your industry**, from the routines of a restaurant business to its financial hurdles.”



3 Vendor selection: consider the culture

"[CIOs] now have the attention of the CEO, they have convinced senior business leaders of the need to modernize technology, and they have prompted boards of directors to accelerate enterprise digital business initiatives. CIOs must seize this moment, because they may never get another opportunity like it."

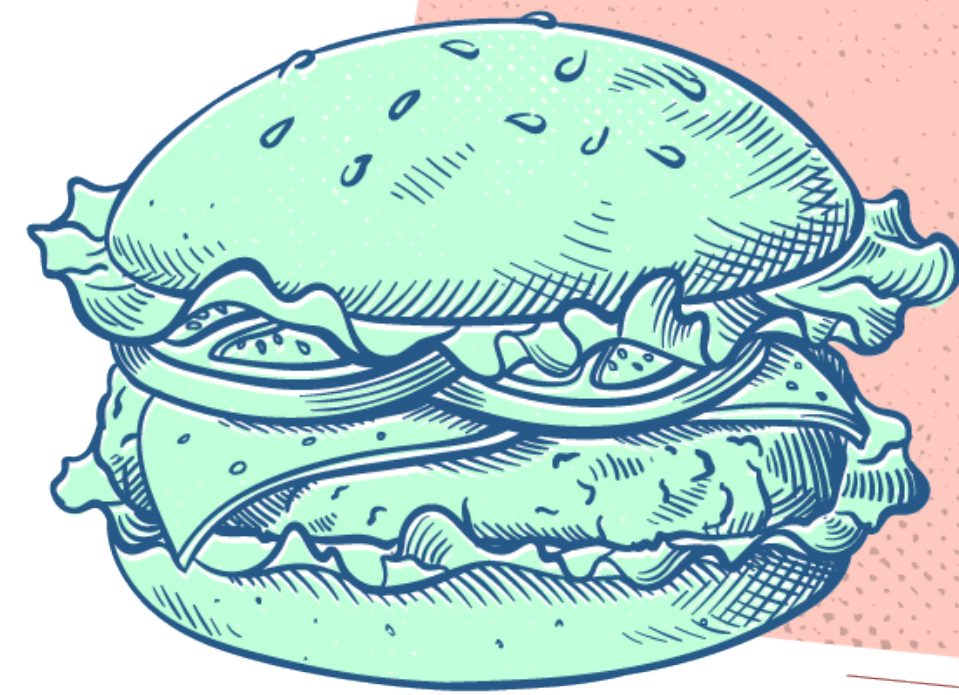
Andy Rowsell-Jones

Distinguished research vice president at Gartner

"Buying new restaurant technology is rarely a one-transaction affair. You are starting a long-term work relationship with the vendor, one that may well last for years. So, before you pick what will be a long-term business partner, make sure that **your vendor's culture matches yours**.

Do they have the same priorities as you? Do you have the same understanding of "work ethic"?

Don't hesitate to meet in person the people who'll be on your account. You need to make 100% sure that you are on the same page, that you can trust them, and that there is a **solid basis** on which you can build a long-term collaboration."



4 Invest in a proof of concept

“Although some enterprises see it as a waste of time, in my experience it usually pays off to invest in a **proof of concept**, or **test pilot**, before you dive into the project.

Although this kind of exercise can be expensive, I advise you to do your best to get buy-in. After all, it’s always expensive to get answers, especially if you want them fast – but it usually costs much more to skip this phase.

Some of the valuable lessons I have derived from proofs of concept include seeing where the initiative will deliver the **key benefits**, and getting detailed and practical information which can then be used to **build a clear business case**. When you have proof to validate specific benefits, it will be a lot easier to talk to executives and other team members about what the new technology can bring to the enterprise, and convince them that this is a project worth investing in.”



5 Fill your team with project champions

“Carefully select who should be part of your project team. The ideal team is made up of individuals who are **respected by their peers, excited about the project, and willing to work to make it succeed.**”

If you pick the right **champions for the initiative** and make them truly believe in the value of the project, their enthusiasm will cascade into the rest of the company. Having people who are well liked in your team can simplify your work tremendously, as they’ll be the ones who help create acceptance for the changes. The difference can be tremendous. I’ve seen projects that were **successfully championed and which got pulled into the business organically.** I’ve also seen projects that, without the right evangelists on the team, dragged on for years and ended up being forcibly pushed onto the employees.

When you select your champions, don’t focus on having executives or management. In my experience, the most successful project teams include employees **from all the various layers and levels** in the organization.”



6 Prepare in advance for staffing changes

“For many CIOs, this is a given: we want to select the best people in the organization for our project team. We aim at success, and tend to pick people who are talented, knowledgeable, and driven.

However, **you probably aren't the only one with this kind of thinking in your company.** If your project takes months or years to complete, chances are that you'll lose some of the best talents in your team along the way. Whether it is because of other initiatives in the enterprise, or because of employee career changes, it all boils down to one key advice: you need to **be prepared to lose some of your key team members.**

Don't assume it won't happen to you. Instead, **have a plan as to how you'll backfill the talent** you'll be losing – and make sure you use your people effectively while you can.”



See technology as a strategic investment

*“Being prepared for the future matters. **Even if a technology may not drive clear returns today, if it puts you in a position to be able to respond to changes, then it’s worth it.**”*

*Leon DeWet
Former restaurant CIO*

“Too many businesses in the restaurant industry still lack a **strategic approach to digital transformation**. I think it’s high time we change our mindset. When it comes to your business’s potential, **an investment in technology** is not very different from an investment in the latest air conditioner or frying system.

We need to start looking at **IT as key infrastructure that supports the business**. You can’t afford to wait until the demand is there before you make that investment. **You need to be ready ahead of time**. This is also a point to keep in mind when you are calculating the return on investment (ROI) of the technology. Keep your perspective open, and before you put a price on the technology, think about its impact in the long run; if it helps you streamline the business, remove needless manual processes, open outlets quicker, or adapt to changing consumer requirements – somehow you need to factor that into your ROI calculations.”

Make your system implementation a success



Eric Miller, Regional Director at LS Retail, has 13 years of experience in software implementations, especially in large restaurant chains in the US.

#1

Plan ahead and be realistic

“Thorough planning is necessary to make sure that the project progresses as smoothly as possible. This means, **no cutting corners**. Look at your business, try to foresee how the project will impact it at every stage of the process, and **create contingency plans**.

When it’s time to plan the timeline, I advise to start by breaking the project down into manageable chunks, from pilot phase all the way to company-wide rollout. Businesses often **forget to factor in important elements** such as how they are going to train staff effectively, at what point they are going to install new hardware, and whether an important milestone coincides with a busy time for the business. Instead of trying to be overly ambitious, it’s better to **set sensible, realistic timeframes** from the start. Take all the necessary time, and then put the effort in to make sure that all milestones are reached on time and in the correct order, at every stage of the process.”

#2

Have all stakeholders on board

“Internal resistance can kill even the best implementation project. **Get the buy-in from all stakeholders from the start**, and make sure that the goals, objectives and expected end results of the project are clear. Also ensure that there is a constant, clear communication flow from you to the stakeholders and from the stakeholders to all other parties involved. It never pays off to sell a dream you can’t deliver on.

Some businesses have compared a new software implementation to a heart transplant. It is a big deal. That’s why it’s important to ensure that the decision-makers in this project are there to answer the critical questions when needed, and that everybody knows exactly what is required of them.”

#3

Review and refine

“With enterprise-scale implementations, it’s hard to plan for every eventuality. Something will change along the way. **To be successful, you must be willing and ready to adapt**. What was deemed to be the best approach initially may need to change – perhaps even after the pilot is completed. I have seen companies that had to **go through multiple pilots before finding the right balance**. Approach it as a learning process and be willing to change your mind.

Large implementations are a constant learning process. That’s why, when businesses think they’re finally ready to roll the system out, I always advise to **stop for a moment**, and take a breather. Pause, see how the system is working, and identify any issues that couldn’t be planned for in the testing environment. To be successful in an enterprise implementation project, you need a well-considered approach.”

#4

Don’t expect immediate results

“While it’s important to focus on the immediate benefits a new solution will bring to the business, it’s just as critical to consider the **long-term impacts**. Will the new solution simplify opening new stores? Will it make staff training quicker, saving you work hours? Does it improve guest satisfaction or loyalty? Does it allow you to expand the business in different ways, from adding new payment options to offering retail sales? Ask these questions and more, keeping in mind that **every item may not improve in the first week**. For example, while the system may be easy to learn or require shorter training, if the staff has been using another solution for years, it will still take some time for everyone to become proficient.”

You don't need to do it all on your own

Choosing new technology is an important, long-term commitment. It makes all the difference to have a trusted partner on the journey with you. Someone who knows your business needs, and can advise you. Someone willing to make positive changes in the product based on experience and industry knowledge, and who will be there to give you ongoing support.

We can help you make this journey a success.

[Get in touch with our experts](#)

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