Charles Jackson is chief information officer (CIO) at McConnell Spice, a Maryland spice company. Within the industry, McConnell Spice has a large national market presence yet is global in its need for raw materials. McConnell Spice is always looking for ways to increase productivity and efficiency while staying connected to its worldwide sources. Two years into the job, Jackson suggested to company president, Ann McConnell, that McConnell Spice implement a new global knowledge-sharing application that promises to cut development time and costs in half. Jackson has done thorough research on knowledge-sharing systems, and has talked extensively with his counterpart and friend, Jack Thyme at the food ingredient global powerhouse, ADM. Thyme agree with Jackson’s assessment of the need for IT sharing systems as he believes they play an important role in a company’s competitiveness in the new global market.

On Jackson’s recommendation Ann McConnell presented the idea to the board of directors, and everyone agreed to pursue the project. McConnell has asked Jackson to investigate firms that could assist the company’s IT department in developing and implementing a global knowledge-sharing application. The system must be compatible with McConnell’s existing systems. McConnell explained that she wants the final project contenders narrowed down to four with the IT’s department recommendation presented by Jackson to the board of directors for the final decision next month.

Jackson took the instructions back to his desk and began to debate how best to go about researching the decision and possible recommendation. Jackson has 11 people in his department, three women and eight men. The three women have more global sourcing experience than the males, so ultimately the new software applications will fall into the overview of the female male members of his staff. Yet, the more experienced IT people are among the men. One of his female workers, Rosemary, has recently come from ADM and has used the new knowledge sharing application there. John came from ADM as well and participated in the selection of the firm who ultimately got the contract. The other workers have a cursory knowledge of the system but would need training. Jackson decided that he would put together a team to research and determine the best suppliers for the job. Their research is summarized below.

Word had gotten out about the new purchase and staff members were discussing among themselves possible candidates. A little in-fighting had developed and there was concern that Jackson would favor ADM people’s choice, Johnson and Company. On the other hand, those workers who currently like the reps at TECH4U think this company can do the application best because they know the current system at McConnell. They may even be able to cut a deal if they had the whole account but TECH4U is known to be expensive. Supporters of Johnson and Company know that the bigger Tech4U doesn’t specialize in this particular application of knowledge-management and may not be able to give the quality that they know is in the Johnson product. One lone IT staffer has been silent throughout this discussion and wonders why Jackson should favor these two companies. He knows of yet another, Information Systems Inc. which should be included. He’s hoping that if Jackson chooses to pick a team to make a decision he can get on the team. Jackson however, is confident that he wants a group decision making process but cannot decide what type will work best. Jackson is not sure whether it should be an individual decision made by him with staff input or whether the entire group should have the decision making authority. One thing is for sure, he and the group only have four weeks to make a multi-million dollar decision.

Almost two weeks into the decision process Ann Mc Connell called Jackson into her office to see how the project was coming along. Jackson informed her that they had identified five major candidates and were currently in the process of evaluating these alternatives. McConnell looked over the summary of the findings to date and balked. “You don’t have Standard IT Systems on this list,” she exclaimed. Surprised, Jackson said, “but they do accounting software only. Admittedly, they do it well which is why we use their software in the Finance Department but for the global sourcing application I can’t see them as a contender.” McConnell looked at him and said, “You are right! They do a good job and I think they can expand into this area easily. They know our systems and we may even be able to get a better deal because this is a new area for them. Be sure to put them on the list.”

Jackson was surprised—Standard IT Systems was known primarily for helping small companies computerize their accounting systems. He was uncertain about them and decided to do as the boss said and put them on the list. He soon found out that they had never done any work related to knowledge-sharing applications, particularly on a global basis. Upon further investigation into the company, he learned that Standard was owned by McConnell’s new son-in-law. Fortunately, he also learned that the firm did have some limited experience in more complex applications. Regardless he thought, I have to tell the team of the new addition.

During the next two weeks, the decision making process continued and it became apparent that Standard IT Systems was not a good alternative for the job.

McConnell happened to meet Jackson in the hall one day and informed him that the Board would meet in next week and he was to present his findings and decision to the Board for approval. With a nod and a wink McConnell said “I know you are for Standard like I am but we have to make the pretense of looking at other options.” Jackson stood with his mouth open staring at her back as she walked away. As the shock wore off Jackson turned toward his office, his mind racing, do I present the team’s recommendation or Standard IT Systems?

Research Results from Jackson’s Team

Tech4U Inc.: A globally known firm based in California with over 35 years of IT experience. This corporation currently provides innovative applications for over 1,000 businesses in 23 countries and is currently the top provider of knowledge sharing applications worldwide with an A+ rating. This company provides 24/7 telephonic customer support and on-site technical support upon request. They give only one week training on the system and for two people only. They also developed the current IT systems for McConnell. They are willing to package the service component of the deal to save money but still come in as one of the two most expensive bids. Tech says it will take 3-5 months to get the system up and running.

Information Systems, Inc.: Based in Dallas, TX, Information systems, Inc. is a rising global competitor next to Tech4U. They specialize in various complex applications and have over 25 years’ experience. They are second in market share and also have an A+ rating. Most known for patenting the K-M sharing system that is currently used in every large US Spice company, Info is experienced in spice companies knowledge needs. They have not worked with McConnell’s existing system but feel confident that the information will be easy to adapt as they have done so with other spice companies. This company also provides 24/7 tech support. They give training for 4 weeks and will make sure that all people who will use the system are included. It is the least expensive of the group. However, they will need 9-11 months for installation.

Johnson and Company: A boutique IT knowledge-management firm Johnson has 10 locations in the continental United States and 4 worldwide. In business since 1997, Johnson and Company has extensive knowledge in complex IT applications with excellent customer service and on-call tech support. They of course train anyone who is named by the company. The clients of the company include some of the major food ingredient companies (including ADM) but no spice firms. This company only provides sharing applications hence their boutique moniker. It is also the most expensive bid. While Johnson is familiar with knowledge management sharing it has not had experience with the current McConnell IT systems. Some learning curve time has been put into the time it would take to get the systems up and running. They suggest 6-9 months.

Standard Company: A local firm that specializes in providing accounting applications for small businesses in the area. This company provides excellent customer service but has limited experience with complex applications and large firms. It has no experience with the type of application needed but for this reason is willing to take the project for less money. They can provide 24/7 tech support with limited training to staff. They will however need more time to develop and implement the application.