10 Principles of Successful Systems Implementation

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1. Think Like a CEO (but ask a lot of dumb questions)

As a CEO, setting the direction and prioritizing an organization's objectives is your most important job. Similarly, when implementing a system vital to your business or organization's decision making, especially CPM or BI tool, one should consider what information is needed to make those decisions and how best that information should be delivered. With Adaptive Planning and its sister applications, the ability to collect, analyze and present a vast array of financial and non-financial information can be bewildering.

In my experience, its best to focus on those key indicators which matter most to the organization and defer less critical elements until a trust relationship exists with the system. Despite being a CEO, you also need to be prepared to ask some dumb questions along the way to get at the essence and prioritize what is truly important to the organization. Don't let your pride or embarrassment get in the way of a successful implementation!

2. It's Your Business

A former CFO boss once told me to always think about whatever job you have as your own business startup. To succeed at your business, you should first determine:

- Who are my customers/audience?
- Who are my vendors/suppliers?
- Who are my share/stakeholders?

Engaging operational and financial management in this way contributes to the benefits of the application and helps develop the trust needed to make the implementation succeed. Similarly, in implementing a system you need to engage and communicate with all interested parties regularly to build and test the system to develop the trust needed to make any implementation truly successful.

3. Put Your 3D Glasses On

Industry's product evolution from traditional cell based applications and 2 dimensional business systems to a multi-dimensional, Big Data view has been a difficult transition for many people. One needs to think of data structures and associated system functionality in 3 or more dimensions in order to generate the analysis and reporting needed to support the business needs.

Using Adaptive Planning's deep modeling capabilities, whether to design an application using, as an example, standard, modeled, cube sheets or data structure considerations of g/l accounts, custom, assumptions and metrics etc. requires careful consideration of these multi-dimensional issues. In keeping with Pareto's Law, 80% of a successful system implementation and ongoing support lies in the initial 20% of the model's design, specifically its accounts, plans and sheets; don't be blinded by the need to take a step back to ensure you've considered these design elements before moving forward.

4. Keep it *Real*

Any system is relevant to the organization if it truly represents the needs of today's business model and also where it's strategies intend to take it tomorrow. In any successful firm, the business model evolves over time to respond to marketplace dynamics but must be able to assess performance in the near term to receive feedback whether those strategies work.

In addition, system features and capabilities, particularly cloud based applications like Adaptive because their delivery mechanisms are more efficient than traditional enterprise applications, also evolve over time. One must continue to evolve or build out an application so it supports new needs or clients as they appear.

5. Be an MVP

Eric Ries, author and leader of the "Lean Startup" movement, coined the concept “minimum viable product” or MVP, for start-ups that works well to describe superior systems implementation. According to Ries, a new venture should be guided by a three step process “Vision, Steer and Accelerate” applied to a product or service with a minimum set of features in order to expose it to the marketplace, get valuable feedback and accelerate its development as it gains market acceptance.

In many enterprise systems implementations, the traditional approach had been to build to perfection, in order to generate the ROI necessary (if present in the first place) to justify the implementation in the first place. Unfortunately what often happens to many companies that try this approach either:

- Run out of time (due to business cycles) or
- Run out of resources (as a result of trying to do too much)

and the software becomes “shelf-ware”.

Rather than trying for perfection, a growing number of companies are adopting Lean Startup principles for systems implementation, especially with today's cloud based solution’s lower cost of ownership enabling building applications in smaller chunks, market testing these applications to gain customer acceptance and then further build-out for additional adoption and superior systems performance.

6. Put iT in Focus

For any successful systems implementation, an organization’s attention must be focused on the meeting the project’s functionality, timing and cost objectives. Companies usually address this need in a few ways:

- Appoint (anoint?) an internal resource, usually from an administrative function such as Finance or IT, as project manager or
- Request the implementation partner provide the project management as part of their contracted activities
- Hire a dedicated project manager

The difficulty with the first method is that the person chosen often does not have IT project management experience or the technical application experience to be effective (as well as doing their day job). And while the second method can be effective with smaller scale implementations, as a projects’ scope grows, the implementation partner can also get bogged down and lose sight of the need for communication and scheduling to ensure the project stays on track. Conflicts of interest can also develop, since the implementation partners are paid hourly rather than for the turnkey project.

The ideal solution for focused project implementation is having a dedicated project manager to attend to ensuring all interested parties’ needs are addressed and for maintaining project communication among the stakeholders. In addition, its also a good idea to have an operational owner for the project representing the business issues is also helpful to prioritize and cut through sticky implementation issues that often develop.

7. Raise your Expectations

These points are self evident but they bear repeating:

- Set clear project goals and objectives
- Develop an action and resource plan to meet the objectives
- Get sign-off on the plan by the project sponsor and implementation team
- Review the plan often; adjust as necessary

Setting a project's expectations is a necessary ingredient to a projects success as it underscores each client or clients needs from the system and establishes a baseline for the resources needed to achieve these objectives.

8. Keep on Talking

Communicating project status regularly in meetings (or similar team communications if the clients are geographically dispersed) is necessary to keep customers and stakeholders up to date and to address issues as they develop. Be inclusive to all relevant stakeholders in these communications for exposure to the project's schedule and deliverables as this will enable the affected groups the time to prepare their organizations with the time to coordinate system and process cutover, training and/or other possible disruptions to previously established business processes.

9. Beware the Feature Creature

Although this point is often missed in the selection process, the software implementation, much like buying a car or stereo, can often driven by cost and the available feature set. However, the more successful implementations are driven not by feature set but by the implementation partner's design creativity and the application vendor's back-office application support. Having these qualities ensures the implementation meets its business objectives and allows proper hand-off to the client or interested party so they can nurture the application properly in the future as their business grows.

Software vendors, often leapfrog each other with features, trying to outdo one another in a side-by-side sales pitch. What isn't brought out is that a good implementation partner with excellent product support can overcome those missing elements as well as developing the business processes that encourage adoption.

10. Enjoy the Home Cooking

In hiring implementation support, you should always seek on site application development. On site development reduces the cost of ownership by speeding application development, reducing implementation errors and addressing the ad hoc issues that develop daily in an implementation. In addition, knowledge transfer and training is enhanced to smooth the post-implementation transition.

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