



Interview: Dr. Robert F. Pack, Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Resources Management University of Pittsburgh

What better way to learn about the ERP Implementation Process than to pick the brains of those who have already done it. Bob Pack, Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Resources Management at the University of Pittsburgh recently talked with Collegiate Project Services about his implementation experience

In carrying out an ERP, some universities put together a full-time dedicated team that is housed together. How did Pittsburgh choose to staff the implementation?

A committed implementation team is crucial to a successful implementation. That being said, one of the problems that you face with such a dedicated team is that they are isolated from where business gets done and they have a limited ability to direct the changes that need to be made.

For our team, we tried to avoid this problem by making sure that everyone retained their positions and remained in their units. Yes, time commitments were changed, but the idea was to keep them as functional members of their departments. It was important to us that they didn't become isolated and weren't seen as someone from outside the area directing what changes can be made. Every single member of our team remained in touch with their department, and as a result they were seen by their colleagues as continuing to be one of them.

Who led this implementation...the IT staff or the functional staff?

I was especially pleased that the implementation team was led by the registrar, and that IT provided a high level of support to the effort. Functional leadership is critical. Often with these projects, IT manages the implementation and that can be one of the worst ways to do it. The student system is an academic system and the priorities cannot come from IT. IT and functional areas have to be able to work together and in our case they really did.

One of the more challenging aspects of an ERP implementation is staying within budget. Your university was able to stay right on target. How so?

Mainly because a lot of the hard work was done before we started the project. That is, we spent several years getting ready for this implementation. Among other things, we built business process maps that allowed us to clearly articulate what we wanted to accomplish before going into this. Since we and the vendor had a much clearer understanding of our processes, bids were more accurate and there were fewer problems in the implementation.

What else helped you to stay on budget?

In the implementation itself, we were guided by a detailed project plan. The plan was sacred. We never deviated from the schedule. Most cost overruns occur because dollars get eaten up by consulting. Most of our costs were with consultants, but since we maintained the schedule, we didn't have to pay more.

How did you handle the inevitable scope change requests?

It was important that my team and I had enough fiscal discipline in the project so that we didn't significantly expand functionality. We had in place a clear process for making scope change decisions. We would determine the cost estimate of the request and assess the benefits that would result. These requests for changes came to me in a clear fashion that included the consequences of not making the change along, with a well defined schedule about when the decision had to be made.

Speed of decision making is important. In large measure, I made those decisions myself without having to go to an executive committee. The most difficult environment to make decisions is one in which the decision making is pushed too far up where there is no knowledge. In those cases you have to spend a great deal of time determining what the issues are and explaining these issues to executives.

In addition to leading the student implementation, you had a full time load as a Vice Provost. How were you able to effectively do both jobs?

The biggest help was that I had an independent, professional project manager reporting to me. He was able to provide the day to day overview of the implementation process and be my eyes and ears on the project. Since he wasn't an employee of the university, his responsibility was only to me so he could spend his time making sure decisions were implemented and bringing me up to date on issues in which I needed to be involved.

You can spend a huge amount of time in just dealing with the vendor; change orders, interpretations of the contract and so on. With a PM, I was relieved of all of that. Your time can be eaten up incredibly in these projects and I needed a way to buffer all the demands on it.

Any other advice for those starting an ERP project?

I would add that when the implementation project is over, someone has to stay responsible for the system. It would be a mistake to turn it over to IT. The real issue is setting priorities for the functional areas because there will always be requests (some of them competing requests) that won't go away. If you can do it, you should resist making IT responsible for choosing among these competing requests.

Once the implementation is over the system should be maintained by the functional team that worked on the project, or at least the same kind of people. There will always be change requests. We thus have a team in place that does an assessment of the complexity, cost, and criticality for any area that proposes any kind of modification to the system that we worked so hard to implement.

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