

Staffing Options on an ERP Implementation

How to Work on the Project and Still Maintain Regular Job Duties

Edwin T. Cornelius III, Ph.D.

Your campus is preparing to replace its existing administrative systems with a new, more modern ERP. The implementation will be complex, will take several years to complete, and will consume enormous amounts of campus resources.

You will face a number of challenges throughout the lifespan of the implementation but, among all of the obstacles ahead, one stands out above the rest: How do we staff this project!???

The Staffing Challenge

Staffing an ERP implementation is a challenge that has raised the alarm on many campus-wide ERP projects. The question most often asked is this:

Will we be able to find the time to devote to the project work itself, given the existing work loads in our departments?

Project work requirements

The amount of time that must be spent on the ERP implementation is not inconsequential. First, functional and technical members of various campus offices must be trained on how to configure and operate the new system. For some weeks, the training can be as much as three days a week. Then team members will have to map current processes,

develop policies and procedures, determine interface requirements, determine reporting requirements, and develop end-user documentation.

In some cases team members will have to get permission from executives to make changes in well-established policies and business processes. They will have to coordinate consensus around policy decisions, and then incorporate these decisions into the decision tables of the new software. They must convert data, interface with ancillary programs, and then test the new system before cutting over from the legacy system. Finally, there will be end-user training sessions, many of which will likely be conducted by the project team members themselves.

An example of release time requirements

The release time needed to carry out this work is substantial. As an example, let's take only the registrar's office for a typical Student System implementation. The Registration and Records module of the new software is likely to take about 18 months to complete. During this time the equivalent of at least three people (possibly more) will be out of the office devoted entirely to this project. The equivalent of two people will likely work on the student records and registration components, and the equivalent of one person will likely work on the degree audit, curriculum and the course catalog components.¹ In many institutions across the country

¹ The number of full time equivalents from Registration and Records that must work on the project will vary by the size and complexity of your implementation.

the loss of the equivalent of three people in the Registrar's office *over an eighteen-month period* would be difficult to cope with. Institutions therefore must figure out what staffing strategies are available to handle this type of project load.

Four Staffing Options

There are four different ways in which institutions have typically addressed this ERP staffing challenge, and a brief characterization of each is presented below.

Option 1: Do the best you can

This approach is somewhat akin to the cliché of the ostrich with its head in the sand. In other words, "let's ignore the problem." Often the directive is handed down as "you must do both jobs and do the best you can."

The end result is predictable. You can't do both jobs and excel in either. Either service to the customer suffers or the work on the project suffers, or both. Most times it is project work that gets delayed. Why? When faced with immediate work that has to be done in the office and work that has to be done to implement the software, it is clearly easier for most staff members to put off work on the project. After all, the software module won't go live for several months, and the thought always persists that there is plenty of time to make it up later.

Unfortunately, this mode of thinking has its holes. As a project management colleague of mine has reminded me on many occasions, "If you can't keep up, you probably can't catch up!" This was true when I got behind on my assignments in College French years ago, and it is especially true on large, complex ERP implementations today.

What are the consequences of relying on this staffing option?

- ◆ Not enough time is spent to configure the system to properly match the institution's needs (costing you many headaches down the road).
- ◆ Important pieces of functionality are not implemented because you don't have the time
- ◆ Deadlines are missed, with huge cost consequences

Option 2: Pay work overloads

This option is very similar to option one, and consequently has all of the same negative consequences. In essence, management asks staff members to "Do the best you can (work both jobs) and in compensation we're going to pay you more to do both jobs."



The incentives are usually in the form of overtime pay, project work bonuses, or other types of overload payments. While it is first-rate that the institution formally recognizes that administrative staff members are going to be doing a lot more work over a long period of time, the fact is that people eventually and invariably will suffer burnout. In case after case, the extra money soon loses its influence as a strong incentive.

What's worse is that more often than not these overload payments have led to even more negative organizational consequences, such as resentment, lack of teamwork, and poor morale. At one university where this staffing strategy was recently used, our interviews with employees revealed that some staff put in the overtime and worked for their extra incentives while others didn't. It didn't take long for

most staff members to stop putting in the extra effort. In the long run the work that was necessary to get the software up and running on time and according to quality standards did not occur, despite the extra pay involved.

Here is the ironic aspect of staffing option two: not only will the institution get all the same negative consequences as staffing option one, but the institution *will now pay more for the same negative outcomes!*

Option 3: Dedicate certain people to the project and everyone else “covers” their work

This is the staffing strategy that is almost certainly used the most in ERP implementations. Departments affected by the implementation will dedicate one or more critical people to work full time on the project, while the remaining department members pick up the extra duties.

In some instances, schools will pull people out of their various functional and technical departments and put them together in a separate project office. This project staff is then dedicated full time, or almost full time, to work on the project. They work shoulder to shoulder and become the implementation team, apart and away from their colleagues.

While these team members work on the project, their colleagues in the various administrative departments on campus are left to figure out how to divide the work load in a manner that does not negatively impact customer service. Thus the remaining department members will take on extra tasks until the implementation of the software module has been completed and the project members return to the department.

This staffing strategy does occasionally work well, but mostly in larger institutions that tend to have higher staff counts. Unfortunately, smaller institutions or departments that are operating with a lean staff size find this staffing option untenable. They simply don't have the manpower to cover the work of those who must spend time working on the project.

Thus, this staffing strategy is reasonable for some institutions, but not others.

Option 4. Hire temporary workers to “backfill” job duties

A final staffing option is to hire “backfills.” Backfills are temporary workers who are hired in a department to cover many of the daily tasks that need to be carried out. This option then allows one or more members of the department to dedicate some portion of their time to the ERP project.

Of course this solution has a clear advantage. By temporarily increasing a department's staff size, the regular work can be done while some of the department members focus on the ERP implementation. As a result, both the implementation and the service to customers can be accommodated.

A disadvantage of backfilling is that it creates an added expense to the university whose ERP budget is large anyway. A second disadvantage is that hiring the right temporary help is easier said than done. Often the daily assignments in a department require the attention of individuals who have some knowledge and experience in that specific area.

Two Methods of Backfilling. We have discovered two approaches to “backfilling.” The first (and best) approach is what we call, ***“lucky finds.”*** That is, we recruit and hire people who have done those jobs before. We have seen examples in which a retired person from the university is coaxed back to work again in a functional department, such as Admissions, until that module has been implemented. In rare instances we have seen the fortunate happenstance in which someone from another Higher Ed institution moves into the area and takes the temporary job, hoping that it will later turn into a permanent job. As you can see, this staffing strategy, although ideal, will result in some recruiting challenges.

The second approach is what we call, ***“cascading upwards.”*** With this strategy the institution will hire a temporary worker or two to fill in for a number of the entry-level tasks in the department, thus freeing

up those who usually perform these tasks to take on some of the duties in the next higher level of the department. This type of backfilling thus “cascades upward” in the organization until highly knowledgeable and skilled staff members are given some relief to at least work part-time on the project.

Many institutions find that combining both approaches (the “lucky find” approach and the “cascading upwards” approach) is a fairly effective way to solve the problem of covering the customer service obligations of a department while at the same time allowing key personnel time to spend working on the ERP implementation. .

In Summary

We have presented four possible answers to the question, “How can administrative staff members work on the ERP implementation while at the same time perform their normal (everyday) job duties?”

Two of these options, “Do the best you can” and “Provide work overload payments” have historically not done as well a job at solving the staffing dilemma presented earlier. That is, it is extremely challenging to expect staff members to work overtime for periods that could extend to eighteen months or more.

Henri Matisse once said, “Work cures everything”. I’d like to amend this sentiment as it applies to staffing options one and two. That is, too much work cures nothing! In fact, in the case of ERP implementations, too much work over a long period of time creates a great number of personal and organizational problems.

Thus staffing option three (“Assign dedicated project members while others in the department cover”) and staffing option four (“Hire backfills”) are the university’s only real choices. If your department is fully staffed or even overstaffed, option three may work for you. If your department is lean or understaffed, then option four (backfills) is your only chance for a successful ERP implementation.

If you found this article helpful and would like to read more, please go to our website at www.collegiateproject.com and browse our ERP Library.