



Interview with Tom Danford, CIO, Tennessee Board of Regents

Tracking Your ERP Implementation Project Progress

The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBOR) is currently implementing a complete Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) suite across all nineteen colleges and universities in the Tennessee system. The ERP suite includes the HR Payroll System, Finance, and Student Information System.

Following is an interview with Tom Danford in which he shares his experience in tracking, monitoring, and measuring the success of an ERP implementation.

How well is your ERP implementation proceeding?

At the Board of Regents, we feel the overall implementation has been very successful. The project has experienced the usual bumps and bruises along the way. However, something we have done in this implementation that I have not done previously focuses on what I call the "three-legged management stool of implementation."

The first leg of our management stool involved using higher education people, who are not professional project managers, and trained them to be proficient enough with project management to manage the day-to-day implementation. At the same time, we provided a third party to work with them and monitor their progress throughout the project. We put in place a system of checks and balances to keep track of progress and if project managers had difficulty, they would have someone to support them with their specific needs.

The second leg of the stool involved the creation of a set of metrics for measuring the progress of the implementation. These metrics were included in weekly flash reports, which enabled us to react quickly if problems occurred.

The third leg included a more comprehensive set of summarized metrics for executives. We used these metrics on our executive dashboard that we disseminate to all the management and senior management across the system, including the Regents themselves.

What has been the impact of these support mechanisms and metrics?

In our system, the flash reports come out on a weekly basis, so people are able to get instant feedback on where they stand with their portion of the project.

Each week we use a red, green, and yellow coding system to let people know the progress they are making against schedule on each ERP module. The impact of this system is dramatic and is driven by the fact that we have wide (and open) dissemination of results. Institutions can evaluate where they stand compared to others. People take it seriously and use the metrics as a tremendous motivator. The problems are always on the front burner and never on the back burner.

So each institution sees the progress the other institutions are making?

In our system, they can. I think it's important. The more widely disseminated the better. In our case, it helps because we're implementing in a cohort fashion of six schools in one cohort, four schools in another cohort, and nine schools in yet another cohort.

When people can see issues happening with other institutions, then information starts being traded across institutions. Sometimes they are able to help one another fix the problem. If the measurement of progress were not communicated throughout the system, the sharing of critical and helpful information may not happen.

Do you think this type of strategy would work at an individual institution?

I think this would be just as effective at a stand-alone institution as it is in our system of institutions. My reasoning is that the dissemination to all levels of management makes it effective. It is not so much the reports are going, in our case, to nineteen institutions, but when the Board of Regents, Board of Directors, and Trustees start seeing these types of reports, they gain interest in the project. I feel strongly it is important that senior management remain interested in and supportive of such a large institutional undertaking.

Project teams don't usually like sending in weekly reports. How did this work for the TBOR?

People don't like going to the dentist either, but it's one of those things you have to do. Our metrics and support metrics are critical to the ongoing effectiveness of our implementation. The results can be painful, there's no question about it. The regular reporting makes sure we are on top of all the issues and nothing is lying in wait to bite us at the eleventh hour.

Once a project gets off track, the budget starts going up. We have to add additional hours to get us back on schedule. I feel it is much better to catch things early by having the warnings up front, rather than trying to repair it on the backside after things have become derailed.

Are you tracking the performance of your software vendor, as well as the performance of the nineteen institutions?

In our implementation, we do track our vendor's performance. For us, vendor training and consulting hours are what we measure. Training consumes many hours and when our vendor provides consulting for the conversions or other things, those are additional hours. We hold the vendor as accountable as we hold ourselves to what they are spending relative to project hours.

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