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Rapid Implementation

Introduction

Much has been written over the last few years about rapid implementation approaches for Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) applications. It has become such a hot topic that some large consulting firms, and even the application vendors themselves, offer “packaged” solutions. In many cases, a packaged solution may work very well. Similar results can also be achieved by applying some practical techniques to managing an implementation project.

Why Rapid Implementation?

As ERP applications become more feature-rich and their scope broadens to cover almost all aspects of business operation, implementation is now a very complex task. As organizations struggled through difficult and prolonged implementations, they discovered that the total cost of ownership for ERP applications was going to be much higher than the initial purchase of licenses. Implementations spanning several years have not been uncommon. The cost of using consultants over prolonged periods plus

the general upheaval caused by having key functional and technical associates absorbed in the implementation has been too much for some organizations.

In fact, prolonged implementations with a sprawling scope, poorly defined deliverables, no clear project management methodology and a lack of commitment from top management, often fail. CEO's and senior managers complain that they never really understood the effect that an ERP implementation would have on their organizations.

Rapid implementation approaches try to address these issues by shortening the life-span of the implementation project and focussing precious resources on clearly defined objectives.

Essentials of a Rapid Implementation

There are some common ingredients in rapid implementation approaches that you should consider.

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Senior Management Commitment

Without the commitment of your organizations senior management team, your implementation is going nowhere in a hurry. Their commitment has to be practical. Will they offer up key functional and technical resources for the duration of the implementation? Will they approve the budget required to move the implementation team around the organization as required throughout the implementation? Do they fully understand the importance of good consulting support to the success of the implementation? Are they prepared to support the implementation team by stepping in when there is resistance to change? Your team needs a sponsor from the senior management team. Their role should be to ensure that any roadblocks are cleared before the project schedule is threatened.

The Project Manager

The Project Manager plays a key role in the success (or otherwise!) of your implementation. Choose carefully! This individual should preferably have previous experience in an implementation and possess good **project management skills**. An overall understanding of the operation of your business will be a distinct advantage. Perhaps most importantly, the Project Manager should be capable of commanding the respect of the senior management team, the implementation team and the users. This should be someone who feels equally comfortable communicating with senior management and rolling up their sleeves to support the implementation team when things may not be going so well.

The Implementation Team

There are many ways to put together an implementation team. The skills of the members are going to range from knowledge of functional areas(Finance, Manufacturing etc.) to very

specific technical knowledge. An approach that seems to work well is to split the implementation team into two parts: functional and technical. Assign a separate Technical Project Leader who will be accountable to the Project Manager for the technical milestones on the implementation project plan. Managing technical tasks requires a different mindset to managing broader functional tasks. As with the selection of a Project Manager, the implementation team members should preferably have previous implementation experience. They should certainly have a good general knowledge of their functional area and be prepared to cross into other functional areas when that is required. With a rapid implementation approach, you should aim to keep the team small. The fewer people that are involved, the easier it will be to get decisions made quickly. This is why it is important to have the support of the senior management team in providing key people as team members. A small group of knowledgeable, respected and authoritative team members will be much more effective in a rapid implementation than a large team of people of mediocre ability.

Consulting Resources

Unless your organization is extremely knowledgeable in the functionality and configuration of your particular ERP application, you are going to need some external resources. Apply the same consideration to the choice of consultants that you would to the rest of the implementation team. Look for a good fit with your team. A **good consultant** should not only provide answers to specific application questions but also a breadth of knowledge that can be leveraged in cross-functional areas. Try to find consultants who can provide you with alternatives rather than wait for you to fully articulate your needs. This is important in a rapid implementation where time spent trying to

“level-set” the team will prolong the project. The choice of using larger consulting organizations or smaller independent organizations is a personal one. Just remember that for every dollar (pound, franc, lira...) of your consulting budget, you will probably buy more experience from a small to medium size consulting firm.

Scope and Deliverables

Ensure that you have outlined the scope of the implementation in a requirements document. Organizations that have been successful with rapid implementations are careful to limit the scope. Be prepared to abandon any plans to undertake significant re-engineering of business processes. **Business process re-engineering** and rapid implementation will not work well together. Perhaps the safest approach (and the path of least resistance) is to limit the scope to only the functionality that is required and wherever possible, avoid any customizations. Make sure that the senior management team truly understands the scope of the implementation project. Any unrealistic expectations should be reset before the project is underway.

Document the deliverables for the implementation project and include review points in your project schedule to ensure that these deliverables are being met. For a truly “rapid” implementation, you will have to tightly control the scope. This is where senior management support becomes important. “Scope creep” is going to happen even with the best Project Manager at the helm. The key thing is to know when to say “No” and to be able to keep saying “No” if that is required.

Communication

You will need to communicate well and often throughout the implementation. The senior management team need to be kept informed of progress to the schedule, any significant issues

that arise and changes to the scope that are required. Users need to be informed of the overall approach and any important changes in processes that affect their job function.

Opinions differ on whether an implementation should have a high profile. Traditionally, within the US at least, implementations have been very high profile affairs with a lot of attendant publicity. While this can be positive in reinforcing the importance of an implementation, it can have negative effects on a project that needs to move fast. A high profile project will attract a lot of attention and with that, a lot of input on what should be done and how it should be done. Remember the discussion on managing scope? While people do need to feel good about the change an implementation will bring about, a lower profile seems to work well in organizations that have been successful with rapid implementations.

If your organization has a global presence, then you also need to consider the issues of co-ordinating an implementation across multiple time zones and diverse cultures. For a rapid implementation approach, you should consider having participation in the implementation team from locations across geographic regions. As well as improving overall communication, this can have the added benefit of improving acceptance for the new applications within a region.

The “Big Bang” Approach vs. Phased Implementation

The “big bang” (multiple locations are implemented concurrently) is sometimes mistakenly seen as an alternative version of a rapid implementation. The “big bang” is also a “big risk” approach and is only ever executed well with a tremendous amount of preparation and a lot of resources being used. These

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implementations are not typically “rapid” as the amount of planning and preparation extends the overall project timeframe.

A phased approach to implementation presents a lower risk. It also adds the benefit of moving the team up the learning curve as individual implementations complete. To keep the overall project a “rapid implementation”, you should aim to keep individual implementations short, perhaps reducing the time between implementations as experience and knowledge grows.

Prototyping and Conference Room Pilots

This is the area where your “bought-in” consulting expertise becomes critical. An **experienced and knowledgeable consultant** can add considerable value to a prototype. In the prototype, you should quickly try to gain as much understanding of the application functionality as possible and begin to apply this functionality to your business needs. Your consultant should be able to provide a framework to structure the prototype and maximize the value of the time spent.

Once the prototyping is complete, you should have a reasonable idea of how the applications need to be configured to support your requirements and what functionality will be required.

A conference room pilot is your opportunity to create a realistic environment to test how your business processes will work using the applications. Again, your **consultants** can help provide a structure for the pilot. In some rapid implementations, this is also a good time to establish a “gold” configuration to be replicated in the production environment. If you are really fortunate, you may be able to copy this environment and shorten the time required to

install applications if your implementation covers multiple locations.

User Training

ERP application vendors do provide comprehensive education on all aspects of their products. If you are embarking on a rapid implementation, then you will quickly realize that this type of education is far too broad for the needs of your users. A good balance would be to use the ERP vendor education as a foundation for the implementation team and then develop **customized training** for your users. If the expertise or resources do not exist in your organization, perhaps your **consultants** can assist with developing training material. Try to direct the training by job function rather than by application. The scripts used in your conference room pilot are a good place to start.

User Support

If your implementation involves several locations, you will also need to consider how you will support users once an implementation is complete. In a rapid approach, your team needs to move on quickly to focus on the next implementation. Support issues can swamp the implementation team and hinder the smooth roll-out of applications in multiple locations. You need to ensure a clean hand over of responsibility to a local support network. What seems to work well is aligning local technical resources with functional “champions”. Ensure that you have a clearly defined process for escalating support issues. At some point, the implementation team may have to provide the answers.

Managing Change

A rapid implementation approach is tough on the implementation team and also tough on the users. There has to be some degree of “force feeding” solutions to the users and this can be

difficult. The implementation team must have the intestinal fortitude to stand over their approach and the solutions they arrive at. Individual issues and requests for enhancements need to be treated with respect. Remember, the objective is to have the implementation move along as fast as possible. Don't let these issues and enhancement requests threaten the scope or project schedule. Make sure that you have an agreed process to document and prioritize enhancement requests. You can start to deal with these once you are clear of implementation (assuming you can keep the team together – and that is another story!).

On-going Reviews

It is not easy in a fast moving implementation to stop and take stock of the progress made, issues that have arisen and the solutions that were found. Make time for review as you move through the implementation. Get the team together and (carefully) solicit feedback from the users. Use the experience gained in an implementation to fine tune the approach, the application configurations, training materials etc. This is particularly important where multiple implementations are involved. You can leverage your experience to improve the approach used as you progress from implementation to implementation.

Recognition

Now that you have abused both your users and the implementation team by forcing change on them at the speed of light, you need to recognize their efforts. Every organization has their own way of doing this (or at least they should have). Although there will always be star players, it is important to recognize team efforts.

Have you considered what should happen to the implementation team once your implementation project is complete? You need to consider this

before the team comes together. Remember, these individuals will leave the implementation project with some unique skills and a deep understanding of your business and how the ERP applications are integrated into your business processes. If you don't have a plan for your team, perhaps your competitors do!

Conclusion

This is only a short examination of some techniques that you can use to manage a rapid implementation approach. There is nothing particularly revolutionary about the individual ingredients. Organizations that have had success with rapid implementations have found ways to incorporate these ingredients into a sound project management methodology that works for them.