IS MY INSTITUTION READY FOR AN ERA SYSTEM?

By Diane Barrett and Deborah Shaver

Managing the sponsored projects enterprise is challenging and complicated. Many institutions have an increased focus on securing external funding, be it sponsored research or other types of grants. We face an increasingly complex compliance environment, demand for accountability and reporting, reduced or flat budgets, and skeletal staff.

For many smaller institutions, these difficulties are even more pronounced because of paper-driven processes. These institutions face such time-consuming obstacles as:

- Antiquated approval processes – running around the campus to get the required signatures on routing forms and other documents
- Inconsistent budget preparation because PIs and campus administrators are using their own spreadsheets
- Manual transmission to Grants.gov, and the resulting need to fix submission errors
- No central repository for project-related data
- No coordination with compliance offices
- Double-entry into disparate systems
- Inconsistent or non-existent reporting

As institutions come to rely on sponsored dollars to greater extents, it often becomes apparent that the infrastructure to support this type of growth must be enhanced by updated systems in order to improve efficiency, but how does an institution begin to evaluate solutions? There are the obvious steps:

- Define the inefficiencies you are trying to address
- Define goals for implementing a system
- Identify functional and technical requirements for a system
- Determine IT's role
- Allocate budget for a system, including not only the cost of the software installation/implementation, but intrinsic costs such as training, communications, enhancements, and ongoing support

At this point, evaluate your upper management support. Without the full and unreserved support of top management, put the brakes on and break out a new box of pencils.

Business process design and redesign

Business process design is a major factor in any system implementation. Often the actual processes in place have not been codified at all or updated in years. This is a first crossroads: to strive and keep the current processes in place as they are, or to use the system as a reason to update them. The temptation can be to let the system dictate what your new process will be and there are times when that will be the case, but it is better to start with what you want and make the system conform to you.

Wish list versus critical features

As you work with your business processes, decide what is essential in a system and what would be nice to have. Nothing blows a budget faster than scope creep – starting with an out of the box system and then going back to the vendor repeatedly to pay for 'just one more little change. You must know at the time you purchase what the system will do, what it won't do, what it can do if you want to pay someone to program it, and what impact any changes will have on future releases. There will, of course, be changes that must be made. Expect to:

- Develop a process whereby requests for enhancements can be made and then vetted by the appropriate parties, including any costs for the enhancement, and
- Be very firm in managing expectations.

Don't assume that because something seems like an easy request to fulfill that it actually will be. On the other hand, those things that sometimes seem the hardest might be a matter of changing a single parameter. Ask, and make sure you understand the answer and the implications before making any promises about changes.

Budget

The software itself is only a portion of the total cost of the implementation. There are communication costs, training materials costs, enhancement costs, ongoing support costs. There may be other costs as well, though, like a clause in your contract that states that you must supply a full-time programmer for a period of time. There are the costs to 'backfill' which nobody can afford to do and it isn't like it is easy to just pop someone into research administration for a few months.

There are also ongoing costs associated with support and upgrades, as well as training and IT support. Be sure you know your limits.

Timeline

Do you have the time to implement a system properly? Perhaps the biggest fallacy is that big implementation projects come in on time. There are also mitigating factors in our field that include:

- Major (and minor) proposal deadlines
- Vacations
- Other time demands on the staff
- Data loads
- Documentation/training updated to fit campus
- Timing of campus roll-out
- Legacy data that must be transferred

The quality of the legacy data can greatly affect not just the timeline, but also the budget. Deciding what data you simply must have and what it would be nice to have must be considered. Do you really need the last 10 years of data? What particular pieces of data? How will the information be used? It would be unusual for the data to not need some kind of cleansing, and this will likely have to be done by an IT professional and take time.

Project Team

Who will comprise your core project team? Will you have someone who can be devoted to managing the project? This often seems to fall to the Director at a PUI, making a hard job even more challenging. Lobby for an in-house project manager, even if you are planning to use a consulting firm to help with the implementation. You will also want to include an IT expert, even with a hosted solution.

Communications

It is easy to overlook a formal communications plan, but keeping the campus informed and invested is critical to success. Departmental staff and PIs from a surprising number of institutions say that they knew little or nothing about a new system until they were told they needed to be trained on it. If it is possible to keep end users involved in the analysis and redesign processes they will stay engaged.

At least some communication, particularly at juncture points, should come from as high up the food chain as possible. The senior leadership must be united in committing to the project's success, and this commitment must be apparent to everyone on campus. And, while leadership doesn't need to know about every single configuration detail, they do need to be aware of any issues that are causing delays.

That said, there may be workflow disruptions. Any new technology takes time to learn, and there will always be days of frustration and delayed productivity. These are natural occurrences in any implementation and should be expected.

Training

Training is essential for success. There are multiple ways to think about training, and each situation is campus-specific. If you have a training unit on your campus, involve them early. Plan the kinds of training you will provide: demonstrations, classes, one-on-one, online, and who will receive the training and in what order. This may depend on how you choose to rollout the system. You want to plan so that people are adequately trained by the time they need to use the system, but not so early that they forget what they have learned.

Who will develop the documentation? Who will do the actual training? If this will be the responsibility of the central office staff, it needs to be taken into account in your initial planning, as it will greatly affect your timeline. Are you planning to use outside resources or can you use departmental people who are particularly good with new systems?

While adequate up-front training is imperative, so is ongoing training as new people come to campus or move into new positions.

Post Implementation Change

Thinking about the steps to implementing a system is one thing, but it isn't too early to think about changes that will occur after you go-live. There will be upgrades and new training needs, on-going questions and the occasional system failure. Be sure you understand the post-implementation support offered on the product you choose.

With all of that in mind….

Make a clear and extensive list of system requirements. The more specific you are, the more detailed a vendor can be in responding to you. Remember that you are dealing in a different type of environment than university to university, and be as detailed as possible. Assume nothing. Also keep in mind that you are looking for a good fit, and that might not necessarily be the flashiest product out there. Ask around and see if anyone is willing to share their own list of requirements/RFP.

Check references and meet the vendors with whom you would be working. Make sure they understand research administration in your type of environment. Supply examples specific to your institution for demonstrations. Most of all, be comfortable with your decision and confident as you move forward, expectations and realities firmly in hand. Best of luck! N

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