

The Importance of Stakeholder Management and Communication during an International Software Application Rollout.

This paper aims to discuss one of the success-making factors for any international rollout and in my opinion the single most important factor – Communication. The term ‘communication’ means many different things to many different people; in the context of this paper I refer to the ‘personalised’ movement of information between two parties. (1:1 rather than 1:n)

Within any given programme there are many involved parties and the diagram here is an attempt to show the complexity of and many routes for personalised communication throughout the life of a programme. A breakdown in any one of the communication lines shown has the potential to create havoc for any international rollout programme.

Below I have outlined an example, from personal experience, of a breakdown or failure in proper communication between the IT function and local business management that created considerable issues for Programme management. Whilst, I am happy to report, the outcome was a relatively successful one, the potential for a calamitous conclusion should be apparent and one which I would hope to help you avoid.

If your organisation is considering the rollout of a common application platform across multiple sites and countries, you will want to consider your success criteria, to document these and constantly measure performance and acceptance against these criteria.

Having been responsible for a number of international rollouts and been the key liaison between Programme Sponsors, Country Management and the Programme Team, my experience leads me to conclude that the one single weapon that any Programme Manager has that must be utilised constantly and effectively is that of communication.

A Programme Manager has many responsibilities and, generally, many competing requirements of his time and resources. His over-riding goal is one of delivery, however delivery alone does not necessarily guarantee success. There are many factors which will contribute to a successful rollout and at the heart of all of these lies communication – Programme Team, Stakeholders, Vendors and other Third-Parties, Local Country management and resource, Users etc. Get the communication right, at all levels of the organisation, and a large part of the success criteria is cracked.

In all international rollouts, the IT function will play a major part, if not actually responsible for the management and execution of the programme. I have worked in organisations where IT is an integral part of the business, seen as key to its growth and strategic plans, however I have also seen organisations where IT is viewed as an unnecessary expense which adds little value and hinders progress through protocol.

The difference between such experiences is the level of communication within the business between IT and business functions, the extent to which the IT Director has a say in corporate strategy development and the customer-facing skills of his team.

All Programme Managers who have been responsible for an international rollout will have stories to tell of where things went wrong or where they flew ‘by the seat of their pants’ or where they had hit seemingly insurmountable resistance. In almost all cases such incidents have the same root cause as well as the same remedy – communication.

As an example, a number of years ago I was IT Programme Manager for a large organisation with representation in many countries and with a responsibility for deploying SAP into each country business. The planning and analysis for each country was initially conducted during the Project Preparation stage, where each business undertook a number of activities. Given the geographical scope and available timelines for this activity it was not possible to visit each location and discuss in person the requirements and underlying importance of the data gathering exercise; thus a number of forms were transmitted from the central IT programme to the local IT function, requesting that they identify the required data and complete the forms.

Included amid these many requirements were such criteria as the number, name and nature of existing software applications, the business function and number of users utilising each application, its relative criticality, data storage requirements, data retention needs, level of customisation, maintenance agreements, required infrastructure etc.

Taking into consideration my earlier comment on the different ways in which business units regard their IT function, the responses received by the programme team varied considerably in terms of both accuracy and completeness. This, of course, only became evident during the rollout to specific countries.

In this case, the organisation had taken a template SAP approach with only local fiscal and regulatory requirements to be built in each country. The implementation and future maintenance needs of each country would be handled by the centralised SAP Customer Competence Centre. Given the information supplied from the data gathering exercise, the programme rollout planning had devised the required budget, resources and timelines for each country.

In one large European country the relationship between IT and business was not particularly strong. As a result, the implementation team on-site came in for a number of nasty shocks around a month before country Go-Live. At this point, all local requirements had been developed, data migration from legacy applications had been planned, scripts written and the interfaces tested, user acceptance testing was virtually complete, training was underway and the project was on-track and on-time.

With approximately 4 weeks to Go-Live a number of the smaller outlying facilities were undergoing training on the new application. It soon emerged that the data they were expecting to see during training was not what they expected, from which it also became apparent that they had not transferred the information for a number of business-critical applications to the local IT team during the data gathering analysis.

The upshot of this situation was that I very quickly needed to make a decision on how to integrate the data from these applications, what changes were required within SAP to accommodate the data, what resources were necessary to execute the migration and physically how was I going to get the data. A middleware tool used corporately was employed to extract, map, cleanse and export the data to SAP. In order to meet the timelines of the programme and not to affect the Go-Live date, a team of 30+ middleware consultants was quickly assembled to execute the requirement.

For those of you who have or are undertaking a major software implementation programme, acquiring over 30 consultants with experience in a particular middleware tool within a week is a daunting prospect.

Thankfully the country went through its Go-Live on-time, however there were issues that as a Programme Manager I was unhappy with: The individual project was over-budget as a result of the unforeseen resource requirements, data testing on the 'new' applications was not as full and complete as should have been the case, data quality of that migrated was not as high as it should have been and the implementation team were put under undue stress, having to give up all their weekends and evenings leading up to Go-Live.

The above example could have easily been avoided if the level of communication had been significantly better and for that I hold my hand up. When you are planning for many countries and are not able to visit each of them, the lesson learned is that time needs to be found for communicating with those responsible for delivering your requirements. Had I found that time, perhaps I would have identified the shortcomings in the relationship between local IT and the business and the information gathering would have been more complete than it was. No two countries are the same, no two IT functions nor business functions are the same or act in the same way.

In conclusion therefore, the key message I can provide from over 17 years of managing international rollouts, is that communication is the major key to your success in your own rollout.

The relationship or alignment of IT and business is critical and that whilst you may not have the time or resource to physically be present in each location you will deploy the application in, ensuring that you understand and can react to any local issues will help engender the success criteria you have developed. Take the time to double-check information supplied and where this comes from within the business then also find the time to agree with business management that the data supplied is complete and accurate.