The New System Is **Live**—
How Come It's Not Better?

Even "successful" technology projects can be failures. They fail to live up to their initial promise and fall short of producing the desired business results.

The following account is a compilation of some real-life experiences that have happened to various CC Pace clients over the past three years. The narrative is told through the voice of a system end-user...

After the announcement that senior executives had decided to review our proposal for process improvements, my fellow processors, underwriters, closers and I waited for two months while the senior leadership team analyzed the costs and benefits of the new solution. You can imagine our excitement at the announcement that the project had been approved and would include a new system to support the required modifications.

Finally, it seemed like things were going to change, and this time for the better. In this case, however, all of our best intentions did not bring about the desired results.

First, you should know that I was instrumental in creating the proposal for the new system. Although I am only a junior processor, I persuaded my supervisor to review a few suggestions that would make our processes more efficient, improve quality and ultimately increase productivity. My supervisor agreed, and after collecting ideas from the other processors, underwriters and closers, I presented our proposal for a substantially streamlined process.

The central themes included routing and distribution of work through a workflow engine, automation of edits against business rules, and paperless document management. During the return on investment (ROI) review of the proposal, the senior management team determined that the changes could save our company more than $1 million a year.

Because our current systems could not support most of the recommended changes, we embarked on a quest to select a new system. I was thrilled when I was asked to join the requirements team, and was given an additional title—subject matter expert (SME)—representing my fellow processors.

However, my enthusiasm quickly dimmed when I caught my first glimpse of the trials that lay ahead. I was asked to spend time documenting high-level business requirements while keeping up with my normal processing workload. This was an exhausting experience. Both tasks were "No. 1 priority," according to my supervisor, who routinely reminded me not to let my loan-processing responsibilities lag behind. Nor did I want them to, because, after all, that was what I was paid to do and my performance affected my bonus.

At the same time, the requirements team leader consistently reminded me that if I did not identify all the key requirements, we might not select the best system. I have to admit that splitting my time between two equally important tasks adversely affected the quality of both.

Shortly after we selected a system and negotiated the contract, the implementation officially started. I was once again asked to join the requirements team. But this time, I did so with a degree of trepidation, because I saw the same number of familiar faces but knew we had twice the amount of work to accomplish. I had to wonder if we had enough people assigned to document all the detailed requirements within the pre-determined time frame. However, I knew that the project's budget constrained the number of additional outside resources—such as consultants—we could tap.

Gathering requirements was a totally different thought process from operations; it was difficult to get into the mindset and determine how detailed to get and what exceptions to document. I also was required to use the documentation templates provided by our information technology (IT) group and was expected to shift gears continuously, re-focusing my attention every couple days on a new area of the system.

I became frustrated at the variation and difficulty of my job as an SME. I am sure my frustration contributed to the frequency with which my fellow SMEs and I

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missed our deadlines. I quickly realized that I was much better equipped to be a processor—a task at which I could excel.

Several months passed during the requirements phase, during which many debates arose about the "new" requirements. I found that the SMEs (myself included) often forgot about our key proposed changes and let the "old" culturally engrained processes reign.

The SMEs often debated several ideas to make the process better, but could not agree on any one in particular. There was

no leader to coordinate us and facilitate our debates. Thus we often found it easier to just maintain the status quo. In the end, we watered down many of the recommendations approved by senior management, which I believe ruined the opportunity to realize a meaningful benefit.

Soon the requirements phase ended and the design phase began. I liked this phase because I had more time to focus on my more enjoyable job as a processor. My workload as an SME dramatically declined, because I was no longer part of the bottleneck of generating requirements documentation. I was now a reviewer, asked to comment on screen mockups and workflow

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diagrams produced by the analysts.

However, I became frustrated toward the middle of the design phase as I realized that half the allotted time had passed, yet only a quarter of the requirements had been translated into design documents. I discovered that budget constraints also limited the design team's resources, so I knew it was not their fault. However, I could not help feeling discouraged.

I began to wonder how the project leaders would decide what requirements to postpone or eliminate. I recommended that the SMEs prioritize the requirements to push those with the most business benefit to the front of the line. That recommendation was vetoed by the project leaders because they had already built their project plan and were concerned that changes to it would affect the deadlines.

The project proceeded according to the plan throughout design and development, although many requirements were ultimately postponed or eliminated. When I finally got my hands on the system during the initial rounds of testing, my heart sank.

Though the system ran successfully, the functionality it provided did not achieve many of the goals that were part of the original business case behind the project. The other SMEs and I fed the developers as many defects and change requests as possible. We successfully added back some of the original key requirements—slightly lifting my spirits. However, at this point I heard rumors that the overall project timeline and budget had suffered significantly.

Finally, the system went "live" into production. I, of course, knew how to use the new system from my time spent testing it. I knew how to leverage the system to achieve the few benefits that had been delivered. My work days were often interrupted by my fellow processors asking me how to perform a particular function. I became known as an SME for the new system, which I did not mind, except that I spent an increasing amount of time conducting impromptu training sessions. It occurred to me that there were probably many users unable to take advantage of the new system because they had not been properly trained.

In the end, we had our new system. But our processes were virtually unchanged. What was changed was done to accommodate missing system functionality—not to improve the process. Those of us who had to use the system were frustrated. Management, which purchased the system on guarantees it would pay for itself 10 times over, was downright mad. And I was disillusioned.

Next time—if there ever is a next time—I would hope we could bring in dedicated resources that are much better at writing requirements (and might actually enjoy it). I would still want to be involved, but only to provide information as an SME and help prioritize the requirements so that if the project ran out of time and money, we would still have some benefits to look forward to. And if we properly trained everyone how to take advantage of the benefits, the processes might actually be better—rather than just new.

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