Managing international system implementations

Action

Managing truly international system implementations brings its own dimension of unusual challenges for project managers. Being prepared for the unexpected and having a flexible approach to maintaining focus on the wider picture takes on greater importance.

Implementing one ERP system in a global business that spans a number of different countries can prove to be a challenging task. Achieving a global rollout that meets the needs of each local office as well as the vision of the Head Office management team requires a considerable amount of resource and effort.

International businesses that implement one system throughout the group generally look to introduce common business practices and global management information which means all countries involved have to be in synch with common aims and goals.

From our experience the challenges a project manager faces on an international project are numerous; some are easier to overcome than others!

When managing a team based across continents a project manager must first understand and then learn to contend with the different languages, cultures and working practices that exist in each country represented in the project. Do your homework and find out what you can on cultural sensitivities and timezone timings. Discuss the task ahead with people who have experience of international projects, so that you don't fall into the common mistakes made on the complex issues involved.

People

The most important factor is the working relationships and dynamics of the project team. The project manager holds a pivotal role in managing the expectations of all parties (countries) and assimilating all ideas and contributions into a global achievement plan.

In the early stages concentrate on team building; get everyone together in one place; set up regular face to face meetings for the duration of the project. Conference regularly with the different teams and encourage contributions from everyone, especially smaller countries; and manage the input from the more dominant parties.

Listen, and allow people to get their message across always taking into account the different cultures and encourage the use of pictures and diagrams as they do speak louder than words. Smaller groups may feel left out of the decision making so don't ignore them or make assumptions that the way you do something (at Head Office) is the way everyone does it.

Language

Establish a common language for communications; for example English. However, even with a common language communications are complicated by; timezones; different interpretation and expression of the common language and business speak.

Misunderstandings will be commonplace during the project particularly where English is not the first language of some project team members; and even when it is, there could still be problems! Remember a shared language is not the same as a shared culture; business culture differs in each country.

Team Morale

Often one country will be often more dominant - normally wherever the project emanates i.e. Head Office. This can lead to resistance from other countries as people won't want anyone from overseas (or Head Office especially) telling them what to do!

Regular face to face meetings involving all key representatives will maintain momentum; keep things simple and focus on delivering the agreed objectives. Good interaction between project team members will nurture working relationships and increase motivation.

The challenge will be managing the contributions of the different teams and ensuring they work as one team by maintaining good communications when they are back at their desks. This will be difficult for the project manager working across timezones – always keep your phone on!

Communicating with and being listened to by the project manager is important for the teams morale and so you must be accessible even outside of standard GMT working hours – this can be tiring! It pays to spend more time working with the smaller countries as this will help the team to gel quicker and provide a sense of importance.

Try to maintain a 'can do' attitude across the team.

Implementation & Control

Agreeing on a common implementation approach will help different countries to work together and enable the establishment of best practice processes.

Putting simple controls in place to monitor project progress will help all team members to stay on track and allow the project manager to pick up on any issues sooner. Monitoring the project is not just about progress against the agreed plan it is also about having an awareness of external factors and any impacts the project may have globally.

Local Support

It will be difficult to achieve common business processes due to localised statutory requirements (i.e. statutory financial reporting & taxation) and business culture.

When planning consultancy sessions with your business system supplier ensure that you include time for local consultants to get involved with the project; this will help overcome the specifics of local business language and culture. This is very important and will help with the establishment of best practice processes.

Training

A good training programme will ensure that the rollout of the system is effective in each country. End User training should always be provided in the language of the end users so that any business questions can be addressed in situ with the local environment and business culture.

Post Implementation Plan

A development roadmap for the system should be put into place before go live; this roadmap should define the central and local support mechanisms for all countries and how improvements made to the system will be controlled and rolled out so that everyone can reap the benefits.