Successful Workflow Roll-outs Start with Planning

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Planning is Key to Workflow Rollout

You spend months reviewing various technologies, months designing the new system, and many more months developing the solution. Now you have finally finished testing the new system, and you are ready to put it into production. Monday comes along and your users are all eagerly awaiting the new system, which you start up at 8 AM. Promptly at 9 AM the users start reporting small problems, that start building up, and then at 11 AM..... the system crashes, and the users are coming down the hallway "arm-in-arm", chanting your name and asking to speak with you. Have you ever had, or heard of a production rollout occurring in this fashion?

Unfortunately, in our industry the importance of change management activities, detailed roll-out planning and the volume of work associated with document management activities is taken for granted. Document management technologies as defined in the AIIM International Implementation Guidelines (available from the AIIM Standards program at no charge at http://www.aiim.org/standards) are an all-encompassing term for document imaging, document services, workflow, forms, and other technologies within our industry.

All organizations planning on implementing these technologies should seriously consider the roll-out planning activities, along with considering the amount of time required to complete them. By way of example, recently a large California state government agency successfully implemented Electronic Content Management (also known as ECM or EDMS) for approximately 250 users, and as described by Sandra Vencill, IWAS Senior Project Manager, Contractors State License Board of the California Department of Consumer Affairs.

> *"Change management and planning for the internal changes along with the impact of those changes on our users was the most important piece of our system implementation, enabling us to implement our system successfully, with minimal impact to the users. A few examples of the change management activities included in our planning are: user preparation and training, procedural documentation, and ongoing end-user operational and technical support".*

Questions to ask during Planning Process

Organizations with a successful implementation of a workflow system for a large number of users, like California's CSLB share this perspective on the need for planning for change management and end-user impacts. The following questions will assist any organization in achieving a similar result:

- Do you want to start-up your system by changing from a manual work process to an automated work process for all users and all work simultaneously?
- Should you remove all existing manual work from the user desktops and insert this into the workflow system prior to Day 1?
- Should you start up the workflow system for portions of the business over a period of days, or weeks?
- Should users begin using the system slowly, completing manual work activities as usual, and getting familiar with the system beginning with a few hours each day, working up to full time, when all the manual work is completed?
- What would be the impact if the system is unable to function for a few hours/days, while "bugs" or "issues" are resolved by the development/ implementation team?

There isn't a "right" or "wrong" answer to any of these questions, but rather these questions should be addressed, or reviewed, along with other issues and differing perspectives that will arise during discussions with the users, technical team, and management. The key is to make sure that you have several, detailed discussions with the user representatives, technical team members, and management during the discussion and planning phases of these activities.

Approaching roll-out planning

One approach commonly chosen by end-users and management, is to begin by reviewing the organizational impact. When implementing these technologies, the method and fashion in which users perform their daily, weekly, and monthly work activities will change dramatically. Recognizing the extent of business process change that will be brought about by the implementation of the technology and the direct impact on the users and organizational readiness is important. As the organization begins to review the organizational impact and evaluate how the users will accept/adopt the new technologies, issues will quickly be identified.

User acceptance and participation in this level of planning is commonly achieved through having senior management visibly involved from the start of the project, along with the supervisory and user representatives. These people (as a team) should review requirements, procedures, project plans, and work toward the acceptance of the new technologies and system throughout the entire project.

Getting user buy-in for the project during the design and testing phases is also important. Organizations that have used "User Champions" (end-users who participate in defining the department needs and share information, project status related information to the other departmental users) have a shorter implementation cycle and faster user/departmental acceptance of these technologies. Also, issues related to training and understanding of the new system, are typically reduced, as many of these items identified during the initial rollout period are "change management" related, or "training" related, and not necessarily technical "problems or issues."

Implementation Scheduling

So, after the organization plans the rollout and prepares the users, the technical team needs to schedule the actual system implementation. This planning should always include a process of addressing problems/issues that will be encountered, especially during the initial days or weeks after rollout. During this time period, it is very important that the technical team have a thorough plan for correcting and resolving reported problems. Some organizations will try to perform these corrections and updates directly to the production components, while others will work on a development platform, and then only update production after the corrections/ updates are verified.

Unless the problem/issue cannot be identified/verified or tested on the development server, it is always considered less desirable to work directly on the production server. A simple update, configuration change, or other update, not properly tested can cause even more problems for the users than the fix/update resolves. Remember that the users will identify and see issues associated with getting their work done. Even if it is a minor issue or problem from the technical perspective, the user frustration can grow quite rapidly, if communication is not good and the user expectations aren't properly managed. Caution should always be encouraged along with always remembering that user acceptance of the system is always tied directly to the system capability and the ease of implementation along with adopting the technology.

Also, remember that the rollout of these technologies isn't all technical! After the rollout has been completed everyone will enjoy using these technologies, just be patient with the users as this is a new technology for them and a different way of doing business.

Robert M. Blatt has more than two decades of experience helping clients with content management and workflow issues through the analysis, design and implementation of ECM systems. He is a recognized national and international subject matter expert in the ECM industry and is chairman of numerous national and international standards setting committees.