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Successful Implementation: A central element to fully materialize the benefits of a project
Case Study   by Manuel Ancizu

Successful implementation: A central element to fully materialize the benefits of a project [1]

Manuel Ancizu

Abstract

A project or idea is successful if it reaches the end user and that happens when it is fully deployed, implemented and reaches successfully the last link in the value chain. Otherwise, ideas remain uncompleted and their associated benefits do not fully materialize.

In this case study, the author shows a key software development project for the company's strategy that, once implemented, was hardly used by end-users; and he tells us about the turnaround process to achieve the true success of the project, which was the software's massive use by the end-users, a crucial step to reach the goals set out in the organization's strategic plan.

Context

A service company had developed a powerful traceability software.

This software enabled total control of shipment status at all times, as well as seamless communication between the parent company and its subcontracted distribution subsidiaries in different countries around the world.

It had been conceived as a key enabler within the group's strategy of expansion, which sought to make its operational structure more robust, increase its efficiency and achieve a significant qualitative leap in the service provided to its customers.

All this was true: the software was very well designed and its functionalities perfectly met the requirements set to make the organization's strategy a reality; its development had been considered a success.

The software was installed in all the subcontracted companies around the world, a person from headquarters made a tour to show its use to the end-users who would manage it in a day-to-day basis and a front-office was set up in the parent company to solve any possible doubts that users might have with the software.

From that moment on, this project was considered successfully finished after having fully achieved its initial goals; everyone was very proud of the software and immediate benefits were expected from its installation.

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Challenge

However, after a few months, some alarms began to appear; there was a problem. A performance evaluation found that the software was not being used in the subcontractors as intended, not enough data was being entered into the system, the parent company still had no visibility into its distributors' operations, and therefore, customers were not receiving the benefits they had been promised in their sales contracts.

The software was only being used as intended in the parent company's central warehouse; in subcontractors around the world, its utilization rate was far from initially expected.

They consulted the front office; with that low utilization rate it could be expected that it would be receiving countless queries and doubts about its operation but, surprisingly, it was discovered that the front office was receiving virtually no queries; the software was not being used properly and the front office was not receiving any failure reports either.

Without data in the system, the software's functionalities were not being activated and, therefore, the strategic objectives based on operational improvement, robust traceability and new customer services could not be achieved. And that was a huge issue that the organization's top management could not allow: the strategic plan and its associated objectives had to be met; and the intensive and complete use of the software was considered a key enabler to achieve it.

They could not understand it; if the project had been considered so successful and the software was theoretically so good, why was it not being used as planned? And why was the front-office receiving virtually no queries or issues to resolve? Perhaps the project had missed something. What could they do to remedy this and get the system into widespread use?

Starting to understand the challenge

The mission was to understand the situation, make an accurate diagnosis and, subsequently, define and execute a solid action plan aimed at the massive and widespread use of the software.

The parent company said that the instructions were very clear and they could not figure out why it was not being used; they simply thought that subcontractors did not want to use it. However, when the field work was carried out with on-site visits to the distributors' warehouses, close conversations with the end-users and quality time shared in situ with them, it became clear that the reality was far from the one explained by the parent company.

This was the diagnosis:

1) The software installation was carried out by a representative from headquarters, who visited the subcontractor for a few days, left the software running, delivered some training sessions and informed about the central front-office to solve issues. Everything went very fast, there was no time for more since the representative had to go to another country to continue the roll-out.

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2) Due to technicians' turnover, some of the people who received the training had switched jobs or even the company.

3) There was a time difference, so the front-office at the parent company was not available during the entire working hours of the subcontractor; this meant that a simple query had to be sent by e-mail and it usually took several days to receive an answer for an immediate operational solution required. In the end, they stopped sending queries because it was not practical, it was not useful at all on a day-to-day basis.

4) There was no periodic monitoring of performance indicators to show the evolution of the use of the software and how this was translated into tangible benefits, so the end-users entering data into the system considered it a waste of time that didn't provide them with any benefit and that caused regular delays in their operations due to the need to enter more data into the application.

5) For all these reasons, they progressively stopped entering all the data requested in the system and executed the operations without having the system complete according to the requirements of headquarters.

As a summary, the perception was that the parent company had installed a very powerful software, believing that nothing else was needed and that it was going to work autonomously and right from the beginning. They had forgotten that, for a management system to work properly, people need to use it on a daily basis and enter all the necessary data to create good reports with accurate information that allows to have a complete view of the situation and to be able to deploy the appropriate actions.

No matter how many functionalities the software has available, if data is not entered, it is incomplete or inconsistent (in some cases it is entered and in others it is not), the software is useless. And this creates frustration, as not all the data is entered, the reports are not complete, which leads to them not being useful, creating more frustration and, therefore, leading to a vicious circle of not using the application.

Moving forward to the turnaround

Spending quality time with the end-users, in their warehouse, day by day, interacting and explaining how the system worked, the benefits it provided, solving doubts,... had definitely paid off. The one-on-one approach generated the necessary trust not only to make a good diagnosis but also to increase the use of the system on a regular basis; they had a person close to them to ask, who understood their reality, who was with them on a regular basis, they started to feel ownership of the implementation plan.

And, as they used the system more and more, they lost their fear of change, they saw improvements, more complete reports, better analysis, increased staff motivation, which led to more engagement... a virtuous circle of continuous improvement had begun.

Staff turnover could not be avoided but proximity had to be maintained; and, because of the distance, it was clear that it could not be done with people from the parent company travelling from time to time to the subsidiaries, it had to be performed with local people with proven knowledge, responsiveness and who understood both the parent company's and the distributor's processes.

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To make the change sustained and perceived as relevant, performance indicators, a regular monitoring process and a system of positive rewards for meeting targets were introduced.

This was the connection between the diagnosis, the action plan and the outcomes:

Diagnosis	Action Plan and Outcomes
1) The software installation was carried out by a representative from headquarters, who visited the subcontractor for a few days, left the software running, delivered some training sessions and informed about the front-office to solve incidents. Everything went very fast, there was no time for more since the representative had to go to another country to continue the roll-out. 2) Due to technicians' turnover, some of the people who received the training had switched jobs or even the company. 3) There was a time difference, so the front-office at the parent company was not available during the entire working hours of the subcontractor; this meant that a simple query had to be sent by e-mail and it usually took several days to receive an answer for an immediate operational solution required. In the end, they stopped sending queries because it was not practical, it was not useful at all on a day-to-day basis.	• Proximity and certified knowledge as the central basis of the action plan. • No front-office centralized in the parent company, but with local people trained and certified by the parent company to provide timely assistance to end-users: proximity, same language, solutions when needed. • These local certified people could transmit knowledge to the end-users and eliminated the problem of rotations and time difference since there were always local certified people to connect, provide training, solve queries in a timely manner and keep the operation moving forward consistently; asking questions was no longer a problem but a means to find the solution. • The use of employees certified by the parent company guaranteed the robustness of knowledge and a proper knowledge transmission.
4) There was no periodic monitoring of performance indicators to show the evolution of the use of the software and how this was translated into tangible benefits, so the end-users entering data into the system considered it a waste of time that didn't provide them with any benefit and that caused regular delays in their	• Creation of performance indicators. • Periodic follow-up. • Rewards as per goals achievement. • Motivating virtuous circle, that led to a higher engagment of employees.

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operations due to the need to enter more data into the application.	
5) For all these reasons, they progressively stopped entering all the data requested in the system and executed the operations without having the system complete according to the requirements of headquarters.	• The software gradually began to be used on a massive scale; and the more it was used and the more data was entered, the better reports were generated and the more clients received the service they had contracted for.

The change was well underway and going in the right direction; and with it, the company's strategic plan had a chance to be a reality.

Monitoring the true success and its lessons learned

The real success had not been to develop the software itself, but the fact that it was used extensively as a key step to deliver the benefits for which it was created.

During the process, they also realized that the project does not end until it is deployed to the last link; as the software was not fully used by each and every end-user, the project remained uncompleted and its benefits did not materialize as they were intended, creating frustration, parallel processes, misunderstandings, etc.

From then on, it was a matter of monitoring its use, improving it, getting the most out of it, sharing lessons learned, seeing that customers were satisfied and that it was indeed adding value to fulfill company's strategy.

Recommendations for a solid successful implementation

1) People are key in a successful implementation, both trainers and end users. Focus on them as the center of the deployment.

2) Change ambassadors: Look for a natural leader or leaders in the organization, well respected, who will act as a link between the project team and the end users; they will receive training in advance, be part of the prototyping, serve as an example for colleagues, motivate, resolve doubts in a close way and contribute to accelerate change.

3) Roll up your sleeves and get down in the mud with the people who will actually implement the final solution. The real change does not happen from the office but by being, talking and interacting closely and constantly with the end-users.

4) Take into account organizational and cultural differences to adapt messages and customize deployment.

5) Monitoring deployment progress helps to detect improvements, best practices and shows teams that what they do matters and it is important. It is not just another change, but a change that matters and it is getting the right attention at company level.

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6) Persistence to the end, implementation requires time and dedication; do not execute too many projects in parallel, be realistic and prioritize, finishing what has been started motivates and reinforces the engagement of the teams; if left unfinished, it usually leads to frustration and reduces the probability of success.

7) Celebrate every success and share all the lessons learned along the way so that they can help to be better in the next projects.

Conclusion

A project or idea is successful if it reaches the end-users, and that happens when it is fully deployed, implemented and reaches the last link in the value chain successfully.

Otherwise, ideas remain ideas and their associated benefits do not fully materialize; even if it is the best of strategic plans, what really matters is that it is implemented so that it can become a reality that creates true value. Real change does not happen at the office, but on site, where end-users perform their day-to-day activities.

About the Author

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Human leadership, Global Sustainable Projects, Renewable energy, Story-teller, Keynote speaker, Lifetime learner, Risk management, Standardization

Manuel Ancizu is passionate about human leadership, sustainable projects and people's motivations. Enjoys working in international multicultural environments and wants to have a positive impact in society.

Manuel graduated in Economics from University of Navarra and obtained an MBA from IESE Business School (Spain); he has also studied in CEIBS (China) and University Anahuac del Sur (Mexico). He holds a number of professional certificates such as the PMP by Project Management Institute, Lead Auditor in ISO 9001:2015 by IRCA Association and has also received training in Management of Development Projects and Risk Management by Interamerican Development Bank (IDB).

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Manuel has lived in Spain, France, UK and Mexico; he currently works in the wind energy sector leading the quality management of Offshore projects. Manuel has been involved in wind energy renewable projects developed in different parts of the globe with external customers, as well as in internal projects of cultural transformation, IT and global processes.

Thanks to his experience, he has delivered training sessions, lectures and keynotes to a different number of institutions.

Manuel is a qualified member of the Spanish Standardization Body (UNE) and has been involved in the development of Standards and Norms in Projects, Programs and Portfolios; he has also participated in the translation of different ISO 21500 to Spanish language.

Manuel loves smiling, storytelling, dreaming and making ideas come true in a sustainable manner.

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