From the Golden Zone

Pay attention to the human side of WMS implementations

By Catherine L. Cooper

Too many WMS implementations struggle and fail, not because of the system's weak technical performance, but because of the tendency to underestimate the human side of the project.

There are project management issues common to most WMS installations, and several basic dos and don'ts for leading a cohesive project team and preparing the organization to go-live when the new system does.

Some common traps, along with suggestions for managing or, in the best case, avoiding them:

Project team development

Here's a typical mistake: You let your team evolve over time by assigning responsibilities to people, rather than assigning people to specific project responsibilities. This can result in a dysfunctional team shaped by relationships and personalities — not required skill sets.
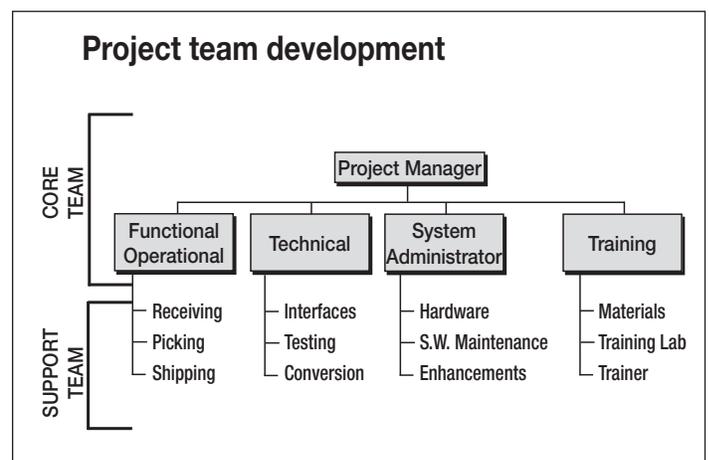
• Do take the time to assemble a group with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. No matter how large or capable your crew is in the beginning, it needs to be properly sized so that momentum and energy can be sustained to the finish line. It is difficult to do this with a large group of loosely knit people, so designate both a core and support team based on functional responsibilities. (See the sample organization chart.)

• Do schedule full-team (core and support team) meetings monthly or bi-weekly, depending on the project's requirements. These meetings should focus on status updates, work-stream dependencies and discussions of interest to all the participants. Core team members, however, should be in constant communication, getting together several times a week to manage issues that might not pertain to the entire group. An additional reason for adopting the Core/Support team structure is that it helps control people's time and the company's resources.

Positive communication

It is a mistake to let the project slowly ramp up as activities are initiated. Instead, be sure to kick off the WMS implementation correctly. Introduce the project to your "customers" — the system's users in the warehouse. The goal is to announce the reasons for, and the benefits of, the project in an upbeat manner.

Project team development

CORE TEAM

Project Manager

Functional Operational	Technical	System Administrator	Training
— Receiving	— Interfaces	— Hardware	— Materials
— Picking	— Testing	— S.W. Maintenance	— Training Lab
— Shipping	— Conversion	— Enhancements	— Trainer

SUPPORT TEAM

The presentation should include the implementation plans along with the explanation on how future updates will be posted: on company bulletin boards, newsletters, quarterly meetings, etc. Explain how the whole project will unfold and review common terms.

• Don't keep project status information secret or attempt to hide issues. No news is not necessarily good news when it comes to corporate activities. Perfect projects rarely exist. You will gain respect by facing difficult issues rather than concealing them.

• Do provide continued project updates following the kickoff. Informing staff of the project status helps mitigate gossip such as, "I heard the project is in big trouble." People are much more positive and understanding when they are informed. And by sharing issues with management, you avoid surprises and may be fortunate enough to receive an unexpected solution. Additionally, people are more accepting of a "Plan B" approach than, "It didn't work."

• Don't assume that everyone in the company has a shared vision of the project goals.

• Do conduct an Expectations Assessment at the start so that you can identify success criteria that you will manage to, such as improved picking accuracy, and expectations that you will need to manage, i.e., seamless global inventory visibility.

Training / Change management

Never underestimate the planning required to develop an effective training program. Weak training programs are a major cause of troubled implementations. Next to having a system that works, a well-trained user group is the most essential component in a successful WMS implementation.

• Don't miss the benefits of getting supervisors involved early as they will be the change leaders and your best chance for early system adoption.

• Do have the supervisors participate as early as functional testing. This approach has cascading benefits. First, it reduces reliance on project team/con-

sultants testing time. Second, it pilots operational concepts with real users before go-live. Third, it trains the supervisors to handle exceptions and troubleshoot problems and enables them to provide assistance with end user training. And as an added bonus, having the supervisor in a leadership role for training increase user acceptance. This becomes useful if the lead trainer is a vendor or consultant, because your people are more inclined to ask questions of their supervisor than an outsider.

> Weak training programs are a major cause of troubled implementations.

• Do explain how the WMS relates to the each person's current job and the effect on the overall operation. Discuss why some activities are no longer required, especially if they are replaced by a new WMS function. A step-by-step correlation between the old and new system and procedures confirms the importance of each part of the user's activities, reduces confusion, and eases any unfortunate return to the old system.

• Do explain how the WMS relates to each person's current job and the impact of his or her actions on the overall operation. It is important to discuss why some activities are no longer required, especially if they are replaced by a new WMS function. A step-by-step correlation between the old and new system and procedures confirms the importance of each part of the user's activities, reduces confusion, and makes any unfortunate return to the old system easier.

These dos and don'ts emphasize the serious attention required for planning implementations. Project activities, carefully planned at the start, eliminate wasted time, money, and effort. Your attention to the people side will facilitate a smooth implementation from beginning to end.

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