12 Tips for Working with Your IT Organization

IT Insight by Jill Barson Gilbert

Anyone who has ever worked on a project with their information technology (IT) organization has stumbled upon a few challenges. IT has a language and culture of its own, and often the IT group and the business it supports have conflicting priorities. I spoke with senior management in environment, health, and safety (EH&S) and IT and combined their input with my own experience to assemble 12 tips on working with your IT organization.

1. Form a Partnership
Make project success a team effort, not a competition; work with your IT group, not against it. IT staff dance to the beat of a different drummer, have different personal interests, and work within a different environment than you do. Embrace these differences.

2. Engage IT Early
Identify an IT sponsor for the project, in addition to your EH&S and management sponsors. Work together to set objectives and to plan the effort. Ask for IT's commitment to make your project a priority and to support it.

3. Conquer the Language Barrier
EH&S software initiatives require fluency in the languages of IT, EH&S, business processes, and operations. Include a multilingual team member, a translator on the project team to serve as a liaison among these parties and the software vendor.

4. Make Your Case
Seek IT's help to prepare your business case. IT can assist with total cost of ownership (TCO) and return on investment calculations and other supporting information. TCO extends beyond software license/lease and implementation costs; it also includes internal and external resources to manage the project; produce the deliverables; and install, test, maintain, and support the system. Be sure to include measurable benefits in your business case, from standardized business processes, data entry time savings, insurance premium, and workers' compensation savings, and improved performance that enhance the organization's decision-making, agility, and sustainability.

5. Be Mature and Informed
Enlist the IT organization to ensure that the selected software fits your organization's technology maturity level. If your organization is at the leading edge of technology, then you can be an "alpha" customer and collaborate with the software vendor to develop and deploy the software.

If you are slower to adopt new technologies, then seek a mature software product. Be informed about the software you plan to buy, and check references.

6. Define Roles, Responsibilities, and Accountability
Define roles and responsibilities. One way is to use an RACI chart or matrix to describe the roles and responsibilities of various people delivering a project or operating a process. The matrix has roles on one axis and key tasks on the other axis. Each cell indicates the role's decision-making authority for each task. The acronym RACI stands for:

Responsible — Those who do work to achieve the task; multiple resources can be responsible.

Accountable (also **A**pprover) — The resource ultimately answerable for the correct and thorough completion of the task. Exactly one "A" must be assigned for each task.

Consulted — Those whose opinions are sought; two-way communication.

Informed — Those who updated on progress; one-way communication.

(For a more detailed description, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RACI_diagram.)

7. Process, Process, Process…
Why is process so important? We should know what we are doing. It is equally important that we know, document, and understand what was done, and how. Process helps people, removes uncertainty and unpredictability, and introduces auditability and governance—this especially important in EH&S matters. To improve your process

- ask the IT group to brief you on their software

Jill Barson Gilbert, QEP, is president of Lexicon Systems, LLC. She helps organizations increase business value by designing and implementing EH&S management solutions that leverage technology.

E-mail: JBGilbert@Lexicon-Systems.com.

CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges we encounter when working with IT organizations are

- ✔ Knowing the language and terminology
- ✔ Stating objectives and needs so that IT understands
- ✔ Keeping IT costs under control
- ✔ Making people accountable and responsible for decisions, tasks, and deliverables
- ✔ Making a business case for automating your EH&S business processes
- ✔ Fitting the proposed EH&S software within the existing IT infrastructure
- ✔ Interdepartmental territorialism and personalities

Working together, EH&S, business, and IT stakeholders can identify and overcome these and other challenges associated with EH&S software initiatives.

delivery process methodologies and understand your involvement;

- collaborate with the IT group to reach a shared understanding of how your EH&S business processes work today—reach a consensus among stakeholders on the future, standardized, streamlined process; and
- employ a recognized, repeatable project management process that addresses project risks and enables success (see *IT Insight*, Managing EH&S Software Project Risks, December 2006, p. 26).

8. Structure Your Infrastructure

Infrastructure is everything that ensures an application can run. Your IT group can be the best source for information on hardware, software, and peripherals you need. Ensure that the infrastructure has adequate capacity to handle the expected user traffic and reporting.

9. Master Your Data

Master data are pieces of information that change rarely, or not at all, like facility, business unit, and equipment names; emission point locations and numbers; chemical names and properties; and units of measure. Ask your IT team which master data exist within other systems. Use the same terminology and naming conventions within the EH&S system and other enterprise systems. Align EH&S and enterprise business processes, using a single business hierarchy to provide transparency and "a single version of the truth." This is essential for trend analysis, "what if" scenarios, informed decision-making, and internal and external reporting.

10. Allocate Ample Resources and Time

Join forces with the IT group to allot sufficient funds, staff, and time to complete the initiative. Implement a change management process to stay within scope. Apply your contingency budget only to the most critical scope changes—that is, the "must haves" not identified during the needs assessment.

11. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate . . .

Cooperate with the IT organization to develop a communications plan; communicate early and often.

12. Test and Test Again

Merely having the right hardware does not mean that it will work. Ask the IT group to test the servers and user PCs or mobile devices to ensure that they communicate with each other. If the organization uses different operating systems (e.g., Windows 2000, Windows XP, Windows Vista), standardize on one version for all software users to improve customer support. Once standardized, have the IT group and end-users test the system.

If you are involved in an EH&S software initiative, then be aware of the challenges that you may face and how to overcome them. Make your IT organization your ally rather than your enemy, ask for their expert advice, and deploy the appropriate tactics to reduce project risk and increase your chances for success. **em**

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