

Life in the Fast Lane

By John Johnston

*"Life in the fast lane surely
made you lose your mind
Life in the fast lane, every-
thing all the time
Life in the fast lane
Blowin' and burnin' blinded
by thirst
They didn't see the stop sign,
Took a turn for the worst."*

*The Eagles — Life in the Fast Lane
(Walsh/Henley/Frey)*

Sometimes speed is a problem; but in business, the cycle is changing. The need for speed is driven by the accelerating rate of change in business, and human resource information management (HRIM) has to keep pace.

In traditional HRIS implementations are the norm. In fact, it is not unusual to hear of two-year implementations. But as the media tell us, “*the Internet changes everything.*” Speed is a critical dimension for business success. The concept of Internet years is upon us. One week is now one Internet year.

Business owners and end users are frustrated. They want information now. They want it cheap, and they want it fast. Traditional methods won’t allow for speed, as they are geared to old methodologies and old ways of managing information systems. What we need is a new approach to getting business results.

The faster your system is up and running, the cheaper it is. *Fast equals inexpensive.* The faster that a proposed system can be up and running, the greater the user satisfaction and the quicker the return on your investment. Yet we keep running into traffic jams along the way.

For purposes of illustration in this article, we will use the example of an e-recruitment implementation. It is a common situation; we all recruit people into our organizations. We have all been through recruitment processes (or lack thereof) either as the recruiter or the “recruitee.”

So how do we put the “pedal to the metal” and reach our destination faster? The keys are the same as they are in any road trip: know your destination, plan your trip, get everyone into the car and *go like hell* — safely.

KEY ACCELERATORS

► Determine your starting point.

Often projects are started before the team is assembled and ready. The key players do not have the knowledge necessary to understand the problem, let alone find the solution. It is essential before a project is

chartered that end users know their current process. In “consultant speak” — they understand the current state. Many times a project is chartered and a project team assembled only to find that the team must spend weeks to gain an understanding of the current process.

Sometimes it is even worse; there is no process in place. In one major bank, each business section of the bank (Commercial, Retail and Investment Banking) used a different process to recruit. They did not deliberately set out to do this; it simply evolved over time. Admittedly, for business reasons, each area recruited different types of individuals, used different sources for candidates and used different assessment methods. It made sense that the unique processes were different.

Each business section had different approval levels (which supervisor/manager had the authority to hire a candidate...), e.g., Commercial Banking required the approval of a senior vice-president, while Retail Banking required a two-level approval (a manager’s manager), and Investment Banking required no approval beyond the manager. There was no logical reason for the inconsistency beyond, “Bill wants it that way.” These approval differences were also geographical (by region), and they were also by level: one approval level for administrative employees and a different approval level for technical staff. These approvals were often cursory, but they added time to the recruitment process.

Each recruiter would also embed individual idiosyncrasies into the process; hence, the recruiting process differed depending on which recruiter was involved. No one at a management level appeared to have any idea that this was occurring, or if they did, they did not view it as important. What they did know was that they were frustrated. They couldn’t recruit employees to meet critical business opportunities. It wasn’t until they looked at automating the recruitment process

that they realized the management process was the primary culprit in creating lengthy recruitment delays.

So understanding your processes *before* you start a project can accelerate the achievement of a successful business result. In saying this, I’ll add a caution: do not overanalyze the current state. You will be changing it. Understand just enough to help shape your future process — no more.

One last comment — if given a choice between modifying your process (or requirements) and customizing the software; modify your processes. Arrive at a common process that will take advantage of the system’s features and benefits and use it.

► Understand the business

If you are considering an e-recruitment solution to meet a business need (faster hires, reduced costs), spend some time learning about e-recruitment. Read material on the Internet; read vendor comparison directories; call a consultant and pick his/her brain; and/or attend a trade show or conference. Learn how to be an informed consumer before you start the project. You do not need to become an expert at this point; you just need to understand the landscape.

► Don’t spend forever on selection — look for shortcuts

Often companies embark on a project by determining business requirements followed by the hallowed request for proposal (RFP) process.

To determine business requirements (in examining automated solutions), companies often assign a project leader or business analyst to determine the requirements needed by a business area. In our e-recruitment example, a business analyst from Information Technology would be asked to work with recruitment representatives to determine the requirements and to prioritize them for the selection process. There are two problems with this approach.

The first is using a person who does not understand recruitment, has never selected a recruitment system

and who has no “skin in the game” beyond completing their assignment. They will take time to understand the recruitment area and to understand how to translate business requirements into systems specifications, but **they will be wrong.**

Imagine deciding to buy a car and selecting as your guide a person who has never driven a car. They know that the car must have four wheels and they know that you want a red car, but they may never think to ask about traction control — because they don’t know that it exists. In other words, they don’t know what they don’t know. Eventually the business analyst will learn the features and benefits of various products, but it will add time to the process and they will likely never have to do it again!

At the risk of sounding self-serving, hire a consultant to guide selection, but do not hire just any consultant. Many consultants are process consultants, and like the business analyst above, you will educate them while they take you through a rigorous selection process. The consultant will be able to guide a selection process and find a solution by researching and comparing, but it will take them time — time you do not have to spend.

Hire a subject matter expert (SME) consultant — a consultant who has worked in this field, preferably as a recruiter and also as a systems selection/implementation consultant. Use the consultant to educate you rather than the other way around. Ask the consultant how many times they have personally worked with the e-recruitment vendors. Ask the vendors to recommend a consultant and then ensure that the consultant is vendor independent. And **they will likely be right** — faster. As a hint, make sure the consultant will be required to stick around to implement the solution. This approach ensures that the consultant will have to live with his recommendations.

The second mistake is using the RFP process. The RFP process requires that exhaustive lists of user requirements be developed. These

lists are then prioritized into “Musts” and “Nice-to-Haves.” They address the business and technology requirements that the vendors must meet to be selected.

Traditionally, RFP’s are developed and sent to as many vendors as can be identified. The vendors must then wade through the requirements and formulate a response. When an RFP is 30 pages or more and has hundreds of requirements, some vendors will elect not to respond due to limited resources. As a result, you may miss out on the best solution, thereby defeating the purpose.

Use your consultant to help determine your requirements. Ensure that they are allowed to spend sufficient time with the users to truly understand your requirements, then ask them to recommend three vendors they feel meet the criteria or who represent the market leaders (both thought leaders and market share). They should recommend not just purchased products but also application service providers (ASPs) and explain to you the advantages of both platforms.

Using the 80/20 rule, select a package that meets 80 percent of your needs now, rather than spending additional time looking for the perfect solution. The search for the perfect solution may take forever and may not yield a better contender. An 80 percent solution now is better than a 100 percent solution months later.

Invite the three vendors to present their products in-depth for half a day using a script developed by the consultant and designed to highlight the differences between the products. One vendor may be knocked out at this stage. The other two vendors should then be asked to respond to the requirements as part of the sales negotiation process. Their claims should be written into the sales agreement to hold them accountable.

► **Make the best use of your resources**

On one project, one of my in-house team members made the off

hand but telling comment when going to a team meeting that “now it’s time to do my night job.” Implementing an HRMS system (or any system) should not be someone’s night job. If they have other priorities, your implementation will suffer.

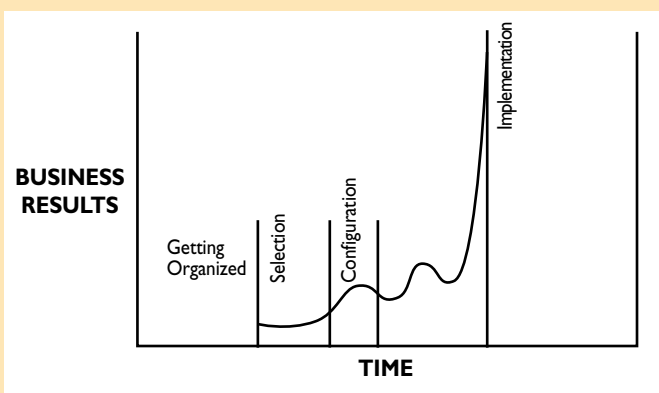
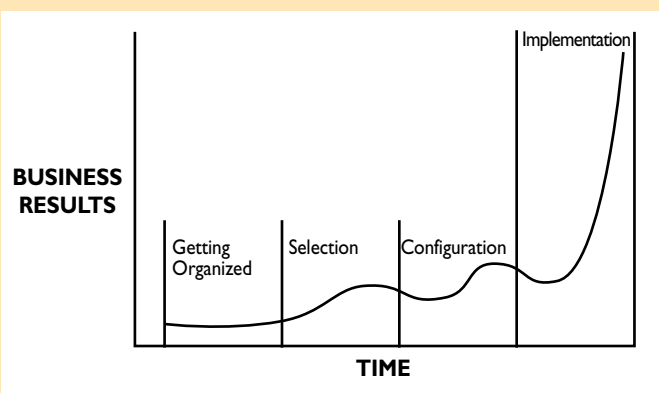
When using a steering committee, make the steering committee members commit to speed in decision-making. Often steering committees meet every two weeks. Project issues are brought to the table and debated and are sometimes deferred so that more information can be gathered. In the words of Walt Kelly (the creator of the POGO cartoon), “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Steering committee issues should be resolved within 36 hours. Absent steering committee members should delegate their authority to the other committee members or be prepared to accept the outcome without complaint if decisions are made in their absence.

During an e-recruiting project, several key divisions might be involved in an implementation. Each division should provide a full-time resource during the design phase and then, as needed, for implementation. The divisions can console themselves with the knowledge that the implementation will be fast, and as a result the resource provided will be gone only for a short period of time.

► **Get everyone on board**

The first and most critical stakeholder is the executive sponsor. A key factor in fast implementations is to have both the top HR person and the top Operations person as sponsors. Sponsorship from only the HR department is likely the “kiss of death” for any HRMS project. At the first sign of a downturn, or when the project experiences any difficulty, the project will be shut down. Any HR system must be regarded as a business system that applies to the entire enterprise — not just as a system for the Human Resources department.

Having your COO or CEO aligned with the project will likely result in sufficient drive to see the project



through to completion even in the event of competing priorities. In order to obtain such sponsorship, there must be a compelling business case for the project.

In our e-recruiting example, a project sponsored by a key operational executive, such as the VP of Sales, will provide the impetus and will link the project to the business requirements rather than being viewed as “HR wanting a new toy.” To gain this support, a clear business case, including the lost opportunity costs, must be presented to justify a project and bring to it a sense of urgency.

On some projects, we have scheduled a kickoff meeting for an HRMS project and have arrived to find that the HR client failed to invite the Payroll department. Issues regarding benefits and benefit accounting were critical to this client, but they left out a key stakeholder in the process.

In any major HR project you should invite any key stakeholder to participate in a structured manner. Payroll, Corporate Security, Information Technology, Budgets, Line Management, and Communications should all be included (and informed) from the beginning, but they should also understand the ground rules. In some cases, it may make sense to have a “core” team and a “halo” team that have involvement in the process. The “core” team would consist of those stakeholders who have considerable involvement, and the “halo” team would consist of those departments/

stakeholders who have a vested interest in the project outcome.

An example of this might be having Recruitment, HRMS, IT and Line Management represented on the “core” team and having areas such as Compensation (who may be involved in the starting salary approval) or Security (for criminal or drug checks) as members of the “halo” team.

When doing process analysis in the early stages of the project, involve both the core and the halo teams in the process design. Following this stage, you may find that you only need to consult with the halo team periodically. However, make sure that both teams are committed to the project’s success. In the process design phase, you should also consider using process design workshops in which all key participants are sequestered in a project room for very focused sessions in order to gain agreement on the proposed process. Ensure that you have agreement (or at least consensus) when the design workshop is complete.

At the design stage, ensure that you integrate training from the beginning of the process. On many projects, training is deferred until the end of the project and often results in delays during the implementation stages. Include training as a critical component of the project, and have the training ready prior to implementation. In our e-recruitment example, ensure that the training staff have developed easy-to-use job aids and customized help screens that

describe your process — not a generic process.

➤ **Don’t customize the software**

No matter how much you want to, no matter how “different” you are — don’t customize the software!

CONCLUSION

Life in the fast lane is not something we need to get used to only once in a while; it has become the status quo. The pace and demands of our business require us to implement faster than ever before. Increasingly skeptical and impatient business unit owners will no longer tolerate the old methods of implementing systems. Our danger lies in not “seeing the stop sign and taking a turn for the worst.”

About the Author

John Johnston (john.johnston@Arinso.com) is the director, strategic consulting and e-HR solutions for ARINSO Canada Inc. He is responsible for assisting clients in creating a more effective and efficient Human Resource function incorporating the use of technology. He is a past president of the Huron Chapter of IHRIM and an IHRIM Board Member.



COMMENTS?

Send an e-mail to the editor (tomf@rector-duncan.com) or fax 1.512.451.9556.