Wiring Watkins University: Does IT Really Matter?

Andy Borchers, Kettering University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case describes the “wiring” of Watkins University (a fictional name for a real Midwestern university) between 1997 and 2003 as the university responded to competitive pressures in the higher education market. After describing the University and the competitive challenges it faced, the case takes the student into a strategy session between the organization’s CFO, CTO and Provost as they review progress on four key initiatives: Web based teaching, student laptop program, a Web based ERP implementation and a proposed “one card” system. Questions are raised as to acceptance of the technology, the impact of these initiatives on the organization’s strategic posture and competitiveness, IT budget planning, and future steps for the organization to take.

Keywords: business value; ERP infrastructure; one card system; technology acceptance; university

INTRODUCTION

This case describes the “wiring” of Watkins University as a response to competitive pressures. The case is set in a strategy session as management reviews four key initiatives: Web based teaching, student laptop program, Web based ERP implementation and “one card” system. Questions addressed include acceptance of technology, the impact on the organization’s strategic posture and competitiveness, and IT budgeting.

This case is based on the experience of a real university from 1997 to 2003. The name of the school, as well as enrollment and financial information, has been disguised to preserve the institution’s anonymity. The general trends illustrated in the data, however, are consistent with real events.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

“It is time to convene the IT steering committee,” said Loran Woodward. The executive conference room comfortably held the three members of the Watkins Univer-
sity IT steering committee and any invited visitors. Loran Woodward, a lifetime academic and engineer by training, served as Provost of the school and was responsible for the academic programs the school conducted. Lawrence Johnston was the school’s Chief Technology Officer. He recently had left the IT industry to work for Watkins. Although he had earned a PhD in engineering many years ago, he was relatively new to the academic world in general and Watkins in particular. Johnson Lee was the Vice President of Administration. A veteran academic, Lee held a PhD in educational leadership and was a CPA. All three committee members dressed in dark suits, consistent with the conservative nature of the school.

It was late March of 2002 and winter had not left the campus yet. As the members of the committee shook off the cold, they faced the prospect of making hard choices on the school’s 2003-2004 IT budget. There were many more IT initiatives than the school had funds to budget. Their challenge was to determine which initiatives and staffing decisions could help Watkins succeed in the increasingly competitive higher education marketplace. The school had recently hit a 15-year low in attendance and was just starting to turn the corner in the marketplace. The school’s President and Board of Trust were eager to hear from the steering committee about positive changes in the IT arena that could help the school succeed.

University History & Organization

Watkins University has a long history of providing technology-focused education to students from the major U.S. metropolitan area where the school is located and throughout the Midwest. First established as a private institution of higher learning in the early 1930s, the school developed a local reputation in the fields of engineering, architecture, science, and, later on, management. Conveniently located on a 200-acre campus in a suburban area, the institution is organized in four schools as shown in Figure 1. The four schools evolved through the institution’s history, largely as a response to the needs of local employers and the needs of its largely commuter student population.

Enrollment Trends & Challenges

One of the grim realities that the steering committee faced was that Watkins was struggling with enrollment. After growing to a peak enrollment of nearly 6,000 students in the 1980s, Watkins faced a steady drop until bottoming out in 1997 at approximately 3,600 students. Table 1 shows enrollment trends for Watkins and its major local competitors — a private urban university, two suburban state universities and one urban state university.

Enrollment and graduation trends in engineering programs, the traditional heart of the university, were equally disturbing. Watkins was well known to employers as a source of entry-level engineers. Even considering declining enrollment and graduation data at a national level, Watkins was losing significant market share. Table 2 shows the number of engineering graduates per year for each of five competing institutions and the U.S. as a whole.
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