The Expert's Opinion

Following is the text of a case study evaluation by Mr. McCarthy on executive information systems in the corporate environment. It relates his experience as a project manager in implementing an EIS pilot project at a New York money-center bank. This project led to his realization that the advice of the EIS’s early propagandists did not go far enough in its appreciation of some of the complexities to be encountered in a typical EIS implementation.

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TALES FROM THE EIS TRENCHES

Perhaps no type of applications has been as hot over the past three years as the so-called executive information system, or EIS. While some of the “fad” in the phenomenon has dissipated as experience has tempered expectations, the underlying developments that presented the opportunity in the first place have not disappeared. Falling costs for personal computer hardware and software, combined with increased functionality, make it more economical to tailor PC-based systems to narrower needs. Hence, we are seeing a proliferation now of various “professional workstation” applications, or applications designed for specific job functions. Improved ease-of-use in particular has made it possible to build systems seductive enough to breach one of the last great sanctuaries of computer illiterates, the executive suite. As experienced EIS hands know, a successful EIS implementation is not quite this simple. While providing ease-of-use is a necessary condition for success, it is not a sufficient one. In fact, the reality of implementing a successful EIS has proven to be even more complex than the early propagandists for EIS suggested. It is important that managers interested in tailoring the computer to senior executive use understand why.

Three years ago, I helped initiate and then managed a project to produce an executive information system for a major New York City bank. After producing a first set of prototype applications, and while still assessing the results of these first efforts, continued funding was suspended in anticipation of a tough recessionary year, effectively killing the project. Though the project undoubtedly would have gone forward were it not for the economic climate, it just as assuredly would not have been cut had it been more successful to date. Though our mixed record was largely due to being at an early stage in the prototyping process, we were not helped by having to cope with many of the major problems attendant upon the implementation of an EIS along the way. In general terms we were well aware of the potential for most of these problems at the outset and attempted to manage accordingly. But this awareness did not sufficiently prepare us to appreciate the subtle but critical nuances that made the problems particularly difficult to solve. I share our experience here in the hope that other firms and other project managers may benefit as a result.

1. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A BONA FIDE CHAMPION

The necessity for an EIS “champion”, or a senior executive who is a driving force behind the implementation of the system, is recognized by nearly everyone as essential to the successful implementation of an EIS. But firms must be ruthlessly honest with themselves in this regard. At my firm we thought at the outset that we had an executive sponsor who would serve as our champion. While instrumental to getting the project off the ground and supportive along the way, he did not prove to be the kind of champion that is required. A champion is the executive who says, “I want this!” (occasionally accompanied by first-pounding on the table). “I’m interested” or “why don’t we take a look” aren’t good enough to indicate the level of commitment required.
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