

Getting the best from your ERP Project team

You want to select the best people for your ERP implementation project but how do you convince them that it's a good career move?

Change is uncomfortable for most people and the best candidates will have many questions and be uncertain about what it will mean to them and their futures. Here are a few thoughts gained from my experiences gained over the last 20 years.

In my paper 'Simply the best (Project Team Members)' at www.neustro.com/whitepapers.aspx I suggested, somewhat tongue in cheek, the type of people that you should avoid, and more importantly, the motivations you should discount for selecting your project team members.

In this paper I hope to give you an insight as to how you can persuade your best people to commit to your project and how to keep them motivated.

Part-time projects....

Many projects, because of their relatively small size, may be 'manned' on a part-time basis whilst you rely on your implementation partner to provide expert resources to ensure success. In this case it is important that you properly commit and ring fence the time of these people to ensure that they get clear and uninterrupted time to concentrate on the project.

The great benefit of this approach for your project team members is that they are going to be the first to learn and use the new system and it will furnish them with new skills. These skills are not necessarily limited to the particular ERP system in terms of its functionality, but skills such as business analysis, business process reengineering and training and coaching as they deliver the new system. The fact that these people are still in the business at the end of your implementation project will ensure you have a pool of expertise that is readily accessible by the rest of your team.

Full time means a new role and a new career....

If yours is a large implementation, typically multi-site or multi-country you will need to seriously consider appointing a full time project team. One of the main drivers for this will be the need to reduce implementation costs. It could well be that the team member is going to be doing their new job for potentially a year or more. By having the implementation partner consultants train your team

and complete the first one or two go-lives with them you will be able to rely on your own team to complete the roll out of your project. This makes financial sense.

For a multinational roll out you will need to pay a great deal of attention to the cultural differences between nationalities, a few thoughts can be found on my blog at <http://it.toolbox.com/blogs/neustro/> as to some of the impacts. However, whatever the nationality of the team members it is likely that they will have the same questions and, more importantly, fears.

More on this in a moment.

The implementation dynamic in this situation is very different to that described in the part-time project earlier. The key difference is that your team will design the new system with your implementation partner, they will then, as described previously, go on to implement each site in turn gaining more experience as this happens. Importantly the implementation approach will require your team to deliver structured training and support to each site as it goes live and then move on to the next. Clearly the team will also provide support to those sites that have previously gone live. This will put additional pressure on them as they try to juggle the demands of both the current go-live and the needs of the established base. Therefore it is clear that some of the key attributes of the team players you are looking for, over and above their knowledge of your business are, the ability to handle pressure and be at ease with the need to multi-task.

Uncertainty is unsettling....

If you are the owner of such a project it is very important that you make it clear what the future is likely to bring to the individuals you would wish to select to be on your project. I have heard the term 'secondment' used in such situations. 'Secondment' gives the idea to the employee that the project is affectively a temporary activity. The reality is though, in such a lengthy task, that the following will be true:

- The employee will have his or her current position filled by a 'temp' or contractor.
- The employee may become 'over qualified' for the role that they are currently in and potentially return to.
- The employee will probably not be interested in returning to their role anyway as it is unlikely to stretch their newly acquired skills.

Therefore I think it is better to make the case for the new role of business analyst or internal consultant. This will truly reflect what the person will be doing for the foreseeable future. However, this will unsettle some people as they will believe that as soon as the project has completed there will no longer be any need for their services – they will see redundancy as inevitable or, if they are particularly suspicious, will believe that you may get rid of them by foul means.

The reality is likely to be somewhat different. You are about to invest a relatively large amount of money into the personal development of these people. A quality ERP implementation consultant can make a good living and will often be in demand by consultancies that are looking for employees that have real-life business experience with knowledge of ERP systems. In short, these people will soon become highly employable. The lifestyle of a consultant is not necessarily the most desirable – once

you've stripped away the seemingly exotic locations and travel to foreign climes, the reality of being away from home for five nights a week, in a budget hotel, in the industrial area of a foreign city will not appeal to everyone. But it will appeal to some.

I would propose that there will need to be a guard against losing your key people to predatory recruiters at a critical stage of your project. Firstly you should certainly make sure that you have a 'no poaching' agreement with your implementation partner. This is an agreement whereby they promise not to approach your employee and offer them a job unless you agree to it. Some people insist that the supplier cannot offer them a job at all, but this can cause the following problem: The person has an offer of a job from an ERP implementer elsewhere. They are determined to become a consultant and so take the role leaving your ERP project in jeopardy. In this situation it would be better if they worked for the partner you are currently implementing with.

Take notice....

Of course one approach will be to extend the notice period of the person involved. This should reassure the employee that they have a future with you – moving from a typical one month notice period to a three, or six month period certainly sends out a strong message and will give comfort on both sides. But I think there is some value in trying to negotiate a provision that sees the notice period reduce to the company norm at some point in the future, after the project is complete.

Why? Well it is this. Your business is going to change and there is a danger that you will be forever committed to a six month notice period payment even some years in the future. The quid pro quo for the employee is as follows: If they decide, after the project is over, to move on, probably because they like the challenge of implementing ERP in larger organisations and the opportunities are limited in yours, then a 'bind' of six months notice will probably ensure that they go to plenty of interviews but rarely get offered the job. Not many ERP implementation partners can wait that long for a resource to become available. They often 'tool up' with people on winning a contract so they will try to get people at short notice. In the end you want a successful project so there may well be a case for paying a success bonus which will be the trigger for the 'return' to the previous norm of notice. I think that the employee will see the benefit of this arrangement.

In the end you gain the commitment of the employee for the duration of the project and you also are honest about the future.

So, I've rather jumped ahead of myself here. However, I think that I have just explained what the key issues are and what the different parties are thinking. Yes, the principles relating to what is good for the business are important, such as how the business will be improved. But in the end you need your best people to do the job and they need to be happy about their future.

And will they be? I think that they should. If they are the type of person that likes new challenges they will get them either with your company, or elsewhere. If they want to earn more money it is likely that they will.

Clearly I am proposing that you get all the issues on the table as soon as possible. Although you are going to discuss some difficult subjects, such as the fact that they potentially may not be employed,

probably by their own choice, by your company sometime in the future, will unsettle some candidates. They may even decline the opportunity.

Clarity....

I would suggest that this is a better approach than the alternatives. The first is that you make promises that you will not be able to keep. Who, these days, is able to promise anyone a job for, say the, next four years? (Accepting that they are not presidential candidates).

Alternatively there is ambiguity. People like ambiguity less than certainty – particularly in relation to their careers. If you don't make clear what the future holds and what the opportunities are then as you near the end of your project you may see key project team members jumping ship because they may well try and sort out their own futures as they may be unsure what you have planned for them.

By being clear and honest with each other you will have a well motivated team who can concentrate on the task in hand.

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About the Author: Martin has worked as an IT consultant for Deloitte and Touche and also as the European IT Director for Mondi Packaging, a division of the FTSE listed company, Anglo American. He has overseen both growth and downsizing of large IT departments and managed IT outsourcing arrangements.

About Neustro: Neustro are the business systems experts - design, implement, manage and support IT for business – from e-mail to ERP. From one-off projects to a complete outsourced service. Neustro are specialists in Microsoft Dynamics AX and Infor Baan.