

A Case and Point – A Perspective On Flat Project Teams

By Thomas Christel

Background/Opportunity

I was hired in as the Corporate Director, Online Enrollment for an 80 school for-profit education system. It seemed like an exciting opportunity, until you looked under the covers. My main charge was given from the CEO himself and it was to increase the use and conversion rate of their online enrollment web-based application, that was currently less than 10% of the new students enrolling, to be more than 50% in 6 months. So I took the job and as I met with the usual groups within the organization, HR, IT, Admissions, Marketing, Local Schools, Student Management, Financial Aid, and others. You began to realize how territorial and disjointed all their web-based solutions were. No integration, no partnering, all creating and designing their own chiefdoms.

Sound familiar?

I was also meet with a “poison pill” upfront from the VP of Online Marketing, my so called partner in this venture, made it perfectly clear, I was to stay out of her sandbox and anything I do will get met with attacks and she will personally make sure it fails. Wow! An adversary and I was in the job only 2 days. So 3 months of lunch buying and sharing my ideas, got me no where. That whipped out my plan of driving online enrollments via online marketing. I even went up the chain of command and was told to deal with it. As it turned out no-one wanted to deal with this particular professional.

So not only did I have my main partner as an adversary, it was clear to me that putting a band-aid on the online enrollment system was not going to solve a bigger problem. So I took it upon myself to broaden my title from Corporate Director, Online Enrollment to Corporate Director, Admissions Automation. Then, I created a plan and short presentation documenting the entire admissions process online from new admissions Representative Training to Student Relationship Management to Online Sales Collaboration and Virtual Online Enrollment. They I went to solicit support from the executive suite. Presenting my ideas and process improvements for the admissions process across the 80 brick and mortar schools to drive, manage, and convert more prospects into starts, starts into graduates. I got my chance when I was invited in a executive meeting to present my proposal. Successfully, selling the innovation and all it components.

So now it was time to execute...

The Team

Did I forget to mention I was a department of one....me! My proposal of 4 major integrated web-based applications was rewarded with the ability to hire one full-time person, I was asking for four. I hired my person as fast as I could while I was improving the Online Enrollment Application and process to provide additional information and streamline the process. We went from 10% to 25% conversion with the online enrollment, a far cry from the 50% directive set by the CEO for me. In the mean-time I was to build my **flat project team**. I incorporate a number of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) – Corporate Director Admissions Education and Training, DVP Admissions, a number of school Admission’s Representatives and Directors of Admissions, VP Student Management, Corporate Financial Aid Manager, and a number of IT’s best, Managers and their design and code teams.

Simultaneous Projects

With all “high visible” projects you have limited time and budget to deliver. So you must create “economies of scale” with your flat project teams incenting your team to even meet and work over the weekends if necessary, prioritize your efforts and manage expectations. Not a simple task when you manage only one manager and the rest of the tea belongs to other departments or corporate functions. The projects we promised to deliver are a complete integrated suite of tools for the admissions teams across 80 schools.

1. Virtual Online Enrollment System – Allow a prospect to click off the web-site the ability to apply and enroll online. We streamlined the process and added additional information for students questions.
2. Student Relationship Management System – this was a web-based application built on top of a ERP backend system. The current system for reps was poorly designed and un-used by 90% of the admissions representatives and their managers. So we built a custom web-base application in .Net built by reps for reps. With all the tools, templates and reminders they need to increase productivity and accuracy. This was also linked to the Online Enrollment System.
3. Sales Collaboration Sites - this was the ability for a student from another state to do a campus visit from home online with their admissions representative walking them through. It had a virtual tour, brochures, student videos, faculty videos, and more. Also a link to the Online Enrollment Site.
4. eLearning Management System - new hire training for all admissions representatives to complete a series of modules to learn the admissions process and tools available for them. Teaching them to use the new tools and learn the new processes for the start.

The Work Around

Remember, my overall goal was to achieve a 50% usage rate of the online enrollment site for all students entering the 80 brick and mortar schools worldwide. So as I mentioned, I started a 10%, reached 25% with a number of improvements. But, since not \$1 was spent to drive or promote the Online Enrollment Site, I needed to approach it from a different angel. Instead of the student's being lead their by my online marketing partner that will never happen. I thought lest work this challenge from another angel and lets have the admissions representatives take the students throught the online enrollment process at the schools.

I made it part of the admissions process to use the online enrollment site. So to convince over 2,000 representatives and 250 managers that this was a better way, then the old process, was a challenge. The new tools helped, because it was built in as part of the process. We went from 10% - 25% - 50% - 75%, more then exceeding the CEO's expectations.

Results

Within 24 months we created, built and rolled out a complete new suite and tools for the admissions process. Including an eLMS for new rep and ongoing education and training, Student Relationship Management system (SRM), Online Enrollment System, and Sales Collaboration Sites for every school who excepts out-of-state students. These teams had been recognized by senior management with an award each year for exceptional team work and support of admissions. We brought the admission departments out of the dark ages of paper and pencil to a fully automated environment, supported by Admissions Representatives who got to focus more on the personal side then the administrative side.

What was Missing?

As I look back and consider all that was accomplished working 7 days week, 12-14 hours a day, for over 24 months. I really wished I had a team collaboration and communication social platform. The amount of time wasted to ensure the teams were all on the same page, communications didn't get lost, wading through thousands of emails, the number of face-to-face meetings rehashing the same old decisions, and lack of visibility and communication tools to senior management. But lets not forget the number of business applications from Office, Survey Tools, Reporting, Process Diagramming, etc. etc. All the data that had to be move across various applications; reformatting, re-entering....I hate to think of all the time wasted. If I were to estimate the time lost it would range about 30%-40% of my time was lost without this type of collaboration and communication vehicle.

Food for Thought

When looking to take on "high visible" projects, ensure you find the best and brightest to work on your flat project teams. Get backing and support from the executive suite, a champion if possible. Don't be afraid to "toot" your teams' or projects" horn. And finally, be accountable, win, loose or draw, not all projects succeed, not all provide the results expected, but all provide lessons learned, best practices and intuitive insights into your business. Whether it's process improvements, information gaps, customer feedback, etc., etc. you learn new components about your business or enterprise for the betterment of the company. The intellectual capital gained is worth all the time, effort and expense.

Thomas Christel – Yooplus - (www.yooplus.com)