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A Conversation With ...
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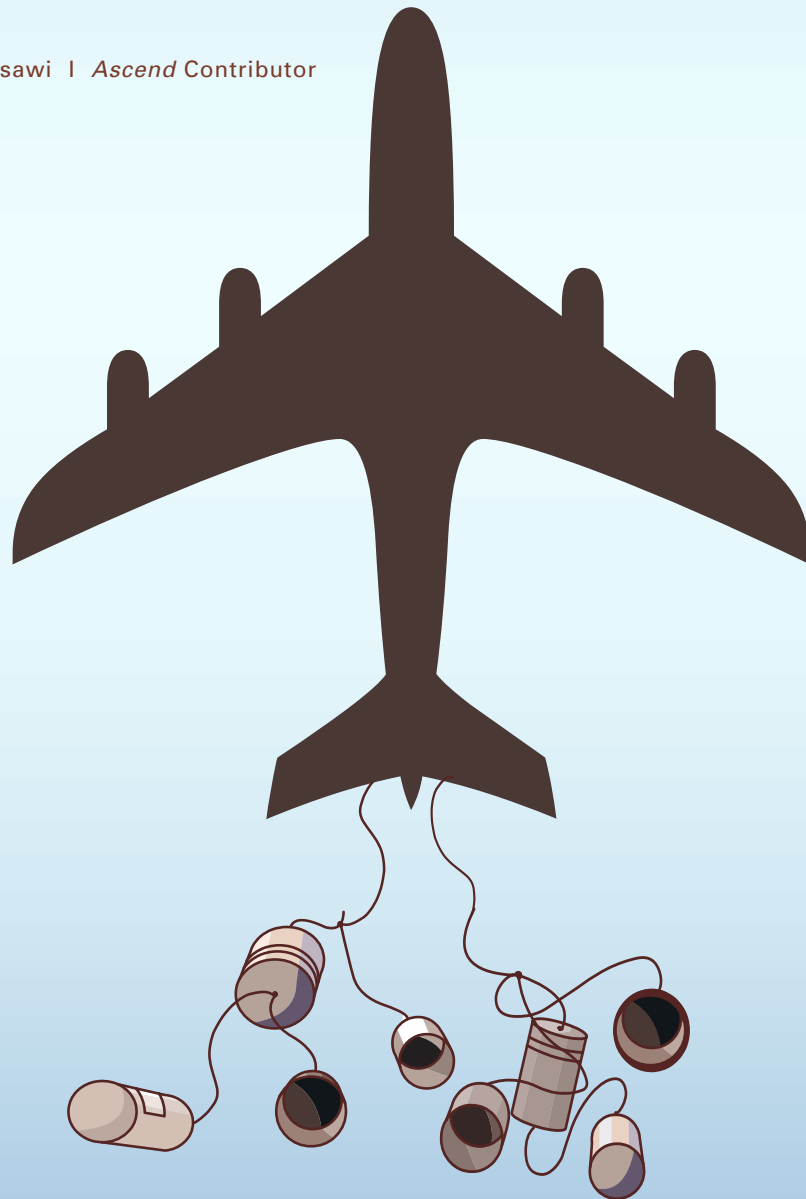
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After The Honeymoon

Preparing for complex IT solution implementations

Business transformation and adaptation must accompany complex technology implementations to achieve the desired outcome.

■ By Khaled Al-Eisawi | *Ascend* Contributor



Airlines around the world depend on IT solutions to market themselves and their products, sell their products to their customers, better serve their customers, and deliver their product in a cost-effective and seamless manner.

Just like any business, overarching objectives include maximizing revenue and minimizing costs while delivering on the customer promise. Because IT solutions are viewed as enablers, more and more airlines concentrate on their core business and push for ways to reap fast, maximum benefits from these solutions under a cost-attractive premise.

Airline IT executives seek simpler, scalable platforms that can enable their growth and adapt to the marketplace in a timely manner. This has given rise to the community model and Software as a Service. While this trend is on the rise, it does not come without challenges for airlines and their IT partners.

One of the most critical challenges airlines may face with large, complex IT projects is business transformation or adaptation. While airlines rely on their technology partners to deliver these solutions, the business readiness and adaptation components are becoming increasingly important yet difficult.

In the past, many airlines relied on home-grown systems. These applications were designed to fit the exact needs and desires of end users, so business adoption seldom posed a challenge. With the community model and Software as a Service, both airlines and solutions partners act based on a common goal of reducing cost of ownership and delivering scalable, future-ready solutions.

This means there may be a need for business users to go through an adoption process. As humans tend to resist change, it is critical to examine the overall benefits of this adaptation and how to sell these benefits across the organization to ensure a successful implementation and the sought-after return on investment.

Preparing The Troops

It all starts with the preparation of the organization for the change. Executives must

have a clear plan to communicate the upcoming changes across all impacted parties within the organization and ensure the enrollment of all constituents. It is absolutely critical that the new solutions are not viewed as being pushed onto the business users by the IT organization.

While the risk of this perception is low among executives, it is alarming how much it permeates within the user-level community in the business. Therefore, champions and change management leaders become extremely crucial for the success of the new technology. While excitement is typically high at all levels during the early stage of solutions rollouts, it is vital for senior executives to establish mechanisms to assess the readiness (or lack of) for the coming changes. Town halls, fliers, posters, newsletters and an internal website dedicated to the project are all good means to start the enrollment process.

As part of the preparation phase, it is important that the business organization understands the needs of the implementation and transition period from a resource perspective. The business obviously has to continue to run as normal, but teams must be formed and allowed the necessary time to complete their tasks. Softer tasks, such as change management, are often overlooked and underestimated.

The Honeymoon

In general, implementations tend to start on a high note. Technology partners send their teams and start the work and all appears to go well. This is the “honeymoon” period. The IT partners also play an important role in ensuring and driving business readiness.

Good project managers use business readiness as one of their project health metrics. They must assess the availability of resources from the business side and determine their level of engagement and that of the business and IT executive teams. Most importantly, they should determine how well business changes are being communicated and received by target end users.

The solutions partner has to be plugged into the business adaptation process and be a crucial part of the implementation of the

change. Business readiness plans must be put together jointly by the business and the solutions partner as well as be executed and tracked as diligently as other technical tasks in the project or program.

The solution partner must assist the business with any necessary business changes, which means it must develop a good understanding of the existing business process. There are good reasons why certain things are done in a certain way. The solution partner brings an external perspective that certain things can be done in a more effective manner. In addition, the new solutions often bring many new opportunities and business possibilities that were previously too cumbersome or impossible to obtain.

It takes a combination of science and art to articulate the business benefits of the change and secure buy in. Oftentimes, users may demonstrate “what is in it for me?” symptoms. It is crucial for the project team from both sides — the solution partner and the airline — to recognize these symptoms early on and devise means to address them.

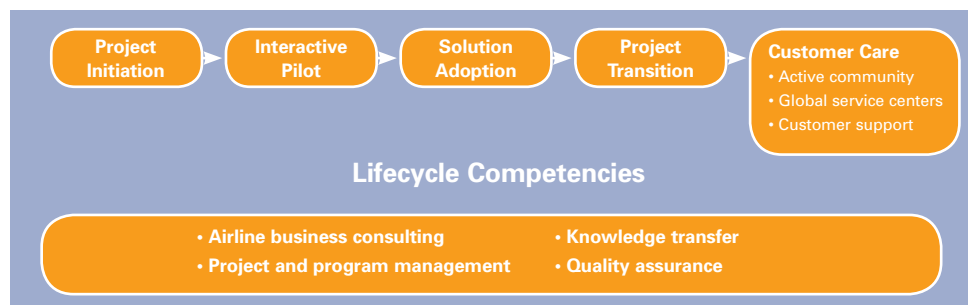
Sometimes such symptoms arise from a perceived notion of increased workload. IT solutions are often sold as automation solutions. While automation can be a goal to reduce manual workload and, hence, costly human errors and staffing levels, it is often not the only goal. Other equally important goals are revenue maximization and cost reduction through effective utilization of expensive assets such as aircraft.

In some cases, IT solutions, especially those used for planning purposes such as *Sabre® AirVision™ Network*, *Sabre® AirVision™ Revenue*, *Sabre® AirCentre™ Crew Pairing Optimizer* and *Sabre® AirCentre™ Crew Roster Optimizer*, change the type of user workload from mundane work to more analytical work. Hence, the workload may not necessarily decrease, but it would generate greater value. This means that part of the business transformation may require employees with unique skill sets that are capable to make the best use of the new solutions. This is why it is imperative to assess the skill sets required and ensure their availability at an early stage in the implementation.

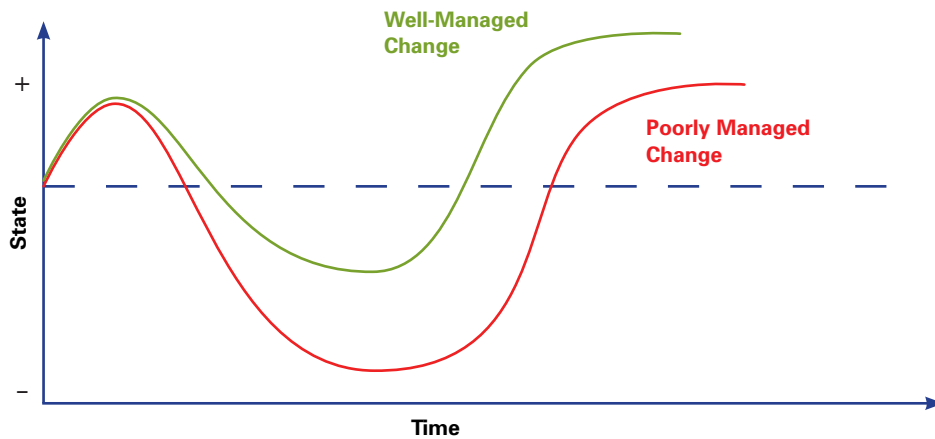
The Storm

The honeymoon phase typically does not last long and is followed by a “storm” phase where the level of happiness drops and drags down the effectiveness of the teams. This is a critical period in any project and must be recognized and addressed by executives from both sides — the solution partner and the airline.

While the storm phase is normal in complex projects, it must not be allowed to continue for a long period of time. One of the mechanisms to control this phase is to develop a clear understanding of the predicament of all the project constituents. Typically, the normal paradigm of assimilation implies 15 percent of constituents



Formalized Delivery Approach *Sabre Airline Solutions* has developed a formalized delivery approach, emphasizing value, adoption and consistency that helps ensure our customers derive maximum business benefits from their purchases.



Well-managed Transformation It is normal for large-scale changes to have an initial negative impact as the change is being adopted within the organization. If the business transformation is well-managed, the duration of the negative impact period will be shorter, and the magnitude of the impact will be less.

are early adopters, 70 percent are neutral or normal, and 15 percent are saboteurs. The saboteurs must either be enrolled or pushed aside. This is usually not easy and requires courage from both sides.

The solution partner’s team must recognize the pace at which business readiness and adaptation must progress. Project governance should include mechanisms for tracking this measure, reporting it, and escalating should any risks or issues develop. If business adaptation is not progressing, the progress on other aspects of the implementation may be meaningless and may result in a disaster.

Such situations often test the courage and resolution of the executive sponsors on both sides. If the airline has an IT governance body, it is imperative that this body takes a transparent and objective approach to resolving these situations. The most effective is a partnership approach that avoids the trap of the blame game and focuses on achieving the desired results. There is usually a threshold of business readiness below which the solution cannot go live. This threshold may not be tangible and may be difficult to measure objectively.

However, the team should be cognizant of training effectiveness, business process changes, staffing levels, organizational changes, logistical needs, and overall awareness and buy in of the upcoming solution implementation. There are typically pressures to proceed even if there are serious warning signs regarding these elements.

Stabilization Period

All metrics are green and the solution is ready to go. It is a big celebration and a high moment. As the excitement settles in, it is normal for the level of happiness to take a dip. Complex solutions will often face a stabilization period as the solution gets adopted in real life. There are simply too many factors influencing the adoption of new solutions.

Users’ knowledge is getting hardened as they use the solution every day and face the different combinations and permutations that each day brings. The solution may present a new way of conducting business within the department and with other up-line and down-line departments.

Some technical issues may also arise. The stabilization period has to be as short as possible

to make sure user confidence and buy in remain high and the potential harmful impact to the end customer (often the passenger) is minimized.

Proper preparation during the implementation phase is critical to having a short stabilization period. Having a good support model to manage the stabilization period in a disciplined and methodical fashion is equally important. But most important is being prepared for this phase at all levels across the organization. The user level must have executive support during this critical phase and executives must be prepared that business may be disrupted and effectiveness may take a small dip.

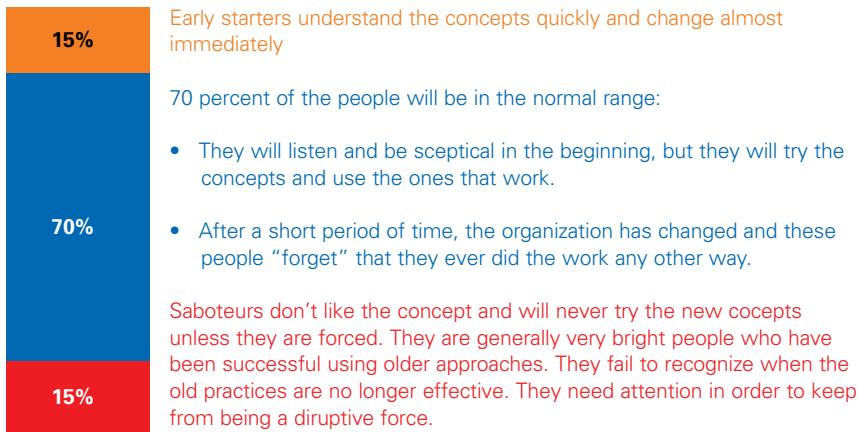
Once the stabilization period is over, steady state starts. However, nothing is steady in the real world. We live in a world of constant change. We are never finished, and this is part of evolution and continuous improvement.

Effective organizations continue to look for ways to improve and adapt to the inevitable change around them. From a technology perspective, leading solutions partners must be ready for the future by continuing to enhance their solutions to cope with changes in the industry before they become an unwieldy problem.

The community model enables airlines to stay intimately engaged with their solutions partners to ensure they continue innovating and shaping solutions to support their strategies. The benefits of the community model go far beyond features and functions of future products. It provides a forum for healthy interaction among airlines.

The community model includes many components such as user conferences, design workshops, customer care and professional online networking for day-to-day interaction. The community in the IT world has many synergies with the civic community. And a strong community can help secure the future of its airlines.

As changes take place in the air transport industry, airlines have a unique opportunity to embrace these changes rather than respond to them. The right formula not only involves investing in scalable technology, but also ensuring proper preparation, processes, communication and employee adoption. **F**



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