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I'm often asked to rank my top reasons why Data Warehouse projects fail. Although I sometimes vacillate on whether "Lack of Infrastructure Robustness" should be #7 or #5, I never waver about #1: Culture.

Data Warehousing presents tremendous challenges to the existing culture of IT departments, and we will examine the elements of those challenges and strategies to meet them in this and future columns. This month I'd like to focus on what happens after you get your Data Warehouse up and running, and come to the blood curdling realization that the easy part is now over.

I consistently draw a room full of moon pie eyes, ashen faces, and sharp intakes of breath when I share this vision of their future with audiences. It's easy to understand. Here they are, the first time down the Data Warehouse path, struggling to come to terms with new concepts, new terms, new products, new demands, new budget challenges, new levels of customer service, and a cornucopia of new worries about overcoming them all to launch this new creature. Now they've got me standing up on stage telling them that building a Data Warehouse is the easy part, just wait until they try to sustain one.

In building a Data Warehouse we have support from the highest levels (if you don't, run away! Lack of it is reason #2 on my list), adequate funding, adequate resources, and the attention of the organization focused on this latest magic bullet that will save the enterprise from its competition and other unseen dark forces. And we are blessed to have the best and the brightest working on the team, as those with talent are drawn to this high profile, leading edge project like moths to flame. This stage of the project closely follows the traditional time/resource curve for IT application development.

Unfortunately for the unprepared, a Data Warehouse never returns to the lower regions of the resource curve. By its nature it is extremely iterative, ever changing, and constantly responding to the changing needs of the business. In short, it never, ever, dies. It is a living, breathing, creature that will require ongoing care and feeding, and an IT management team that responds to its changing character, capabilities, and scope. Its ongoing changing demands on the supporting IT management team form a fluctuating demand 'tail'. This tail requires a vastly different set of abilities, outlooks, and metrics than standard OLTP application development.

The specific challenges are:

- maintaining ongoing funding
- cultivating and securing ongoing executive support
- sustaining a robust development and support team
- engendering total customer focus
- rapid resolution of problems
- rapid implementation of user requests
- nurturing and leveraging successes

There are several steps that will greatly assist you and your team in meeting these challenges.

1. Start with the understanding that this project will never end.

Communicate clearly and effectively to your team, to management, and to users, that this project number will be open indefinitely. This will establish the expectation that the Data Warehouse will require significant resources into the foreseeable future. It will also create a culture within your team of an ongoing program mind set, and of the opportunity for continued positive exposure at the highest levels.

2. Recruit team members who are user oriented

People who consider users as necessary evils required to fund their ongoing career development are not optimum choices. Data Warehouses require an unprecedented level of user orientation in an IT team. It is critical that the team understand that the entire reason for the existence of the Data Warehouse, and its support team, is to serve the needs of the users.

3. Establish user oriented goals.

I recently spent some time with an IT Data Warehousing team that was struggling with data architecture issues. After analyzing their proposed design, and presenting alternatives, the discussion boiled down to their realization of “either we do the work to make the information accessible, understandable, and easy to use, or we make life easy for us and make the end users do all the work”. A prime example of the culture challenge rearing its ugly head. To prevent such occurrences, establish a clear user driven mandate as part of the foundation of your efforts.

4. Create, maintain and cultivate close relationships with ‘power’ users of the Data Warehouse.

The direct route to ongoing funding and support from the enterprise is to do everything in your power to ensure the success of these users. Train them, encourage them, cooperate with them, and nurture them. Help them to make their programs, processes and initiatives impactful and valuable to the enterprise. In turn, make their success your success. Clearly communicate that the unique capabilities provided by the Data Warehouse were the enabling technology that brought the incremental income or savings to the enterprise. Use these successes as examples to drive ongoing funding and resource requirements.

5. Measure yourself and your team on user satisfaction metrics.

One of the greatest cultural challenges facing a Data Warehousing team is to break away from traditional metrics toward a ‘customer satisfaction’ metric model. Data Warehousing is fundamentally a service business, not a technology, code generation, or even a data business.

Although daunting, the cultural challenges of managing the ‘tail’ can be overcome. Next month we’ll look at the equally challenging impact that Meta Data has on sustaining your Data Warehouse.

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