

IT / Eng Tech Restructuring Project at SAIT Polytechnic – Leadership Wins and Challenges

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Introduction

“To accomplish great things, we must not only dream, but believe; we must not only plan, but execute.”

SAIT Polytechnic Management Action Plan, October 2006

SAIT Polytechnic is committed to on-going curriculum renewal projects. This is especially important in the IT and Engineering Technologies fields because technology changes rapidly. The IT/Eng Tech Restructuring Project is an aggressive curriculum renewal initiative currently taking place in the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) Department.

The goal of this project is to create restructured Information Technology and Engineering Technology programs for an initial launch in September 2007. The project

will also insure that the IT and Engineering Technology programs are industry aligned and validated. These programs will incorporate new and innovative instructional techniques to position SAIT Polytechnic as a leader in learning and to attract and keep students in these programs.

The Review

For many years the “talk” around the ICT Department centred around when official updates to the IT and Engineering programs would take place. Many instructors and Academic Coordinators had taken it upon themselves to “revitalize” their own courses, but had not formalized it through the SAIT Polytechnic curriculum change process. People in the department felt that if no updates were included in their programs, the programs may not survive much longer, but a formal plan to change had not gained the momentum required for action.

It took the initiative of the department Dean at the time and VP Academic to form the IT/Eng Tech Program Review Team tasked with analysis of the programs at risk, and the even greater task of offering recommendations for alignment with industry needs and future growth. This team formed in 2005 and looked at seven ICT programs: Broadcast Technology, Computer Technology, Computer Control Technology, Computer Engineering Technology, Electronics Engineering Technology, Network Engineering Technology and Telecommunications Technology. Not only were these programs suffering from declining enrollments, but the escalating attrition rates were becoming clearly documented – something had to change or the entire department would suffer. It was evident that the programs were not meeting the needs of industry or the most recent generation of learners.

After several months of extensively reviewing program data (including enrollment rates, student satisfaction surveys and employment statistics), this three member task team recommended significant changes to five of the seven programs and an extensive renewal of the remaining two.

Leading a Team Without a Leader

The IT / Eng Tech Restructuring Project team was formed in late May of 2006. The eight member team included a project manager, an instructional designer, an administrative assistant and five instructors who were offloaded from their teaching duties to participate in this massive curriculum initiative. Only one member from the review team was assigned to the newly formed project team. This team was tasked with completing the analysis, making recommendations about program design, attaining program government approvals and initiating development for the first year of the new programs to be launched in the Fall of 2007 – a timeline acknowledged by all to be very aggressive.

Initially, this section of the paper was intended to solely discuss how the project was initiated with many of the right elements for success, but was hindered by a significant number of “people” losses and changes, particularly the loss of the project manager. He was assigned the role of project manager but was never an active participant. He left for holidays at the end of May and never returned to the project or SAIT Polytechnic and was never replaced. When we began to reflect on the project’s life over the last ten months, we realized that we have struggled with not only missing people, but also have been challenged by the complexities of having additional organizational leaders, both transactional and transformational, participating in our moving forward without a clear definition of what role each played. That being said, the team moved on to the first step in the process by creating a project charter and set to work.

From the outset of the project, the challenges described by Sommers were inherent and real for us,

“Aside from the requirements changing, many other things can stop, start, or fluctuate during the project. Experienced people may leave and new people may come on board. Budgets could get chopped. Schedules might get slashed or—sometimes even worse—delayed. Resources may evaporate or not materialize in the right forms.”

Managing Project Risks (Part 1): Don’t Be Snared by These Six Common Traps, Adele Sommers.

Over the past ten months, core team members have been added; moreover, subject matter experts have come on board regularly. Indeed, in our case, the project challenges have always been more human resources than technical.

After the departure of the project manager, the team seemed to begin a journey of always “pulling from behind”. A huge win for the team early on was the emergence of leaders within, specifically, our current project leader. In the initiation of the new project, the current project lead was the one team member who bridged both projects – the review and the restructure. The concept of “Leading From the Middle” as discussed by Patricia Aburdene in her book *Megatrends 2010*, was exactly what this team needed to get started and progress. The passion and belief that the restructuring was necessary was infectious in the team room. The urgency and pressure of the timeline, along with the determination to succeed in the face of apparent failure, meant that the team focused on important analysis and design tasks. Each development lead stepped up in his or her own area of specialization to move the project forward and make things happen; when one person was demoralized another was not.

New team members join the project as subject matter experts and not only must be oriented to the project’s goals and vision, but are another strain on resources because they have to be managed. We have been fortunate to have the core team members step up with guidance and support and, in some cases, act as project managers.

As a team, we have been forced to deal with some isolation due to our intense involvement with the project and the controversy surrounding the change. In fact, we may have created some of that isolation to protect ourselves from the intense emotion the project has sponsored within the department. Other members of our department may not feel the intense pressure or urgency of our tasks and our goal. In addition they do not understand our vision for the new programs because they have not had to “live” in it. Though we might like to think that projects are about delivering products, we have come to understand that projects are about a team of people working together with the passion to meet a real and meaningful goal. The final result resides firmly at the end of the road, but we all understand that our successful, high-performance team is essential to reaching our goal. We also understand that we are all leaders in that regard.

Although the project seemed to start without a defined leader, the emergence of leadership within showed the strength of the team and allowed analysis and design to begin.

Soliciting Faculty Buy-In and Communication With All Stakeholders

There is no doubt in any team member’s mind of the truth in the mantra “communicate, communicate, communicate”. Communication was critical to our success as a team and to our progress both within SAIT Polytechnic and outside of it. Certainly, our faculty group, as key stakeholders in the change process, were of primary importance, but we soon found that the administrative support, information systems and other members within our department all needed to be consulted. It was identified that a need for structured communication with the stakeholder groups was critical and a new team member was brought on board to handle that entire portfolio. Although the communication flow began from the team to the stakeholders, it was mostly virtual and not face to face. The lack of time to properly conduct face to face collaboration proved to be a huge problem later on in the project when the team needed subject matter experts and consultants from the faculty group. We also found that “buy-in” is not an accurate description for what we needed; collaboration or consultation is better suited.

We continue to struggle with overall acceptance from our department; perhaps this is because we are continually conflicted about who these programs are being designed for - students, industry or faculty? In reality, it is a healthy balance of all three, but we have realized that we spent more time with industry than faculty in the beginning. This might be because communication with “outside” parties proved more comfortable and less emotional than communication with colleagues and peers in the midst of a change process.

Another big win for the project team was the incredible support we found from industry and other SAIT Polytechnic departments. Our Customer Service department was with us right from the beginning and has been an integral part of our development process – something that is not always the case at the institution. The credit for this healthy relationship can be attributed to the active role of our Stakeholder Engagement Team

Lead. She was able to engage other departments who have been encouraging and willing to participate throughout the project: Earned Revenue (Training Division), International, Advising, Recruiting, Center for Academic Learner Services, Information Services, Corporate Marketing and Communications, and many more. Our success with this relationship resides with the vision at the project outset to place someone in the role of Stakeholder Engagement and with the fact that these groups, though stakeholders, are less caught up in the turmoil of change.

As our launch date approaches and the “old” programs are being suspended and cancelled, the urgency and need to understand what is happening next is overwhelming within the department. Clearly, the coming change will create fear for some stakeholders. We understand that during transition, much of what we are experiencing is a normal part of the project process and are working closely with our management team to communicate our updates as efficiently as possible. The urgency that we have known for the past ten months has become our friend, and will become a win for us going forward. We are ready for the question that this urgency drives: “how are we going to do this?” rather than “are we still going to do this?”. It is always amazing how it only takes one “leader” in a group to accept a change and others seem to follow at their own pace. However, the leader who recognizes and encourages all team members (or stakeholders) to be a leader from the middle is truly a leader.

Project Team Collaboration and Decision Making Processes

“Friends at work contribute meaningfully to retention, productivity, service, and satisfaction.”

Vital Friends, Rath

Although all members of this team are part of the same department, many have never worked directly with each other. Before collaboration and decisions could be made trust needed to be earned with each member. The initial core team has almost all of the characteristics of a high performing team: shared purpose and direction, multiple lines of communication, shared goals, commitment to individual and team roles, reliance on diverse talents, mutual support and trust. (Clay, 2000). What is, unfortunately, missing is empowerment for the team as a whole. This team has strong, shared vision, reinforced by the project leader, and that keeps morale up. One team member tells a story repeatedly about when the team first formed and began course design. The team members were each sitting at their desks quietly working. He remembers the “aha” moment they had while brainstorming. They realized that they had so much in common and could be working together; this is where the common first semester in the IT program began to take form. It is also just one example of the team’s growing mythology – the stories that motivate people and support a unique team culture.

A critical factor in effective collaboration is the team room environment. Although each team member has an office on campus, all were brought together into one large work room. Our team room has individual space for individual work, but a large team table for

collaborative work and discussions. This large table has been so successful both within the team and with others that there has been an outstanding order for a larger table! Most of the team members remember the pivotal day they took possession of the team room. Each member had the tools and the space they needed, including pens, pencils, mouse pads and personalized “elixir” mugs, to move forward – this was truly the moment the team began to form their identity.

There are many natural leaders in this team which help in time of urgency and crisis. We can always count on at least one person in the room to take charge of a situation or offer an alternative view to a problem. This often happens during the decision making process. There are some on the team that can look at an issue and quickly offer a suggestion while there are others that need more time to research and discuss the issue before comfortably adding to the conversation. This is sometimes a source of frustration for the team as the quick decision makers are sometimes not as receptive to the methodical team members need for more time or discussion. However, there is also comfort in knowing that the methodical team members will thoroughly investigate the issue and come to the table with all of the information; information our quick thinkers hadn't thought of. Having said all of this, the decision making process is definitely accelerated in this team simply due to the nature of the project, and the many critical deadlines that have to be met.

The team recognizes that there are some decisions that can happen at the team level and there are others that need to go beyond to the Dean of the department and the Manager of Academic Services. The decisions that need to escalate are typically the ones that cause the most frustration to the team. This project has incredibly tight timelines and many decisions need to be made in a matter of days or even hours. When decisions must go beyond the team, processes and development typically become delayed. To successfully work with this situation we have relied on the solid communication and foresight of our project lead. With her guidance we have anticipated delays and understand why they are happening.

Dealing With Scope Creep

“The minute after you've cemented the requirements with everyone's agreement, “scope creep” begins.”

Managing Project Risks (Part 1): Don't Be Snared by These Six Common Traps, Adele Sommers

Scope creep, additional duties, “other”, whatever you want to call it, this team has experienced it in volumes. Many other variables have been introduced throughout the project: the credential framework, a standardization of credits and hours to enhance articulation opportunities; a proposed Bachelor of Science in Internetworking degree that would require a bridge from our new Information Technology program; an electronic method of capturing competencies and developing curriculum using the Worldwide Instructional Design System (WIDS) which became a mandatory part of all new

curriculum initiatives; the ripple effect of being short-staffed due to team members being offloaded and out of the classroom for a year; the introduction of problem based learning in curriculum; the inclusion of measurable professional competencies and shared evaluations over several majors. What has helped the team maintain its perspective as the project has grown is its common vision and the encouragement of the project lead. The project lead was able to take all of the additional requirements listed above and provide justification of their relevance in most cases. We were fortunate that the demands did not all come at one time but our project lead anticipated many of them and was able to prepare the team to handle them. Certainly, there were some, like the credential framework, that were neither expected nor planned for but incorporated anyway.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Where to begin? The lessons learned have been hard, insightful, obvious and have helped us grow as a team. Are there things we would do differently now? Definitely. Are there things we would do the same? Definitely. What follows is a brief list of what we would do differently next time:

- Use external facilitators when conducting potentially emotional meetings.
- Complete a proper project plan, communications plan and marketing plan from the beginning. This would have clearly identified the need for a smaller scope or to have the project broken into three projects. We also would have been able to better anticipate the changes in the project as we moved through the phases and properly plan for transition.
- Assign and employ multiple project managers including a curriculum manager, “people” manager, stakeholder manager, and a “mega” project manager.
- Encourage virtual and face to face communication continuously from the Dean of ICT and the Manager of Academic Services.
- Remember to celebrate successes – even small ones. The accelerated pace of this project made it easy for us to just share the good news in the team room but then just move on to the next problem – we didn’t stop to really celebrate. Learning to celebrate would have also allowed us to see the transition in project phases.
- Understand that being on a project is a different kind of work. The structure of an instructional setting is missing for instructors in a project, especially a project without a proper project plan. Our team could have benefited from education about project work as well as a project management course.
- Operational work like the day to day running of the department is different than project work but both are integral for project success. Recognize this.
- Working so closely together and building personal relationships with team members may cause strain on those relationships if expectations are not fulfilled.
- The “me” factor is incredibly important and critical for team and stakeholder “buy in”. Consider the “me” factor even for the team – they can be forgotten and that affects the team as a whole.

- Keeping project challenges within the team is very important to maintaining a cohesive team.
- Recognize the need to be communicating to stakeholders to build trust and to instill confidence with that group.
- How to work with your leaders and to know what to expect from your leaders.

What would we do again and encourage others to remember? The list that follows outlines our thoughts:

- Remember the positive power of a strong high functioning team. This includes the realization that a team needs to go through the storming phase to earn trust and bond.
- Remember to have fun and laugh. The introduction of a team “happy ball”, a Halloween pitch fork and a super-charged foam dart gun were all a part of our fun.
- Recognize the importance of a shared facility and of a shared virtual workspace.
- Pay attention to intuition – sometimes you just have to go with your gut.
- Learn to adapt to surprises and capitalize on opportunities.
- Take time to debrief.
- Run very effective meetings and recognize the importance of agendas. Remember the critical importance of efficient and effective administrative support who buys into the vision.
- Understand that support is hidden – sometimes it is only given in private ways due to the politics of the organization.
- Love your team culture; mythology, private jokes, telling stories etc.- this is something to be proud of; team identity.

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