

Managing the Transition in the Post-Go-Live Environment

by | **Michael J. Goldberger**

The fund office has gone live with a new information technology system. In this final installment of a three-part series on choosing and implementing a new technology platform, the author discusses how to keep the system running smoothly.



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MAGAZINE

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In the modern fund office, once the go-live date for a major systems implementation has passed, the hard work to make the best use of the investment begins. Information technology (IT) helps provide the foundation for quality member service, and there is little room for the bumps in the road and frequent downtime that can characterize the “post-go-live” environment. One can hope that the drama and tension of a complex systems implementation has subsided. Now the time has come to put away the celebratory hats and live with the results of all that effort.

In this third article in a series about technology considerations for multiemployer and public funds, the focus turns to how to return to efficient operations as quickly as possible after the system is launched. No doubt, the fund administrator and trustees will be eager to see that the target return on this major investment is realized. This article offers techniques to manage the “steady state” of fund office technology, viewed as a continuous portfolio of smaller projects rather than an all-out focus on a single go-live date:

- Learn to operate against a backdrop of constant change.
- Gently change user behavior (also known as the people challenge).
- Keep requirements and documentation in sync with the system.
- Maintain data integrity.
- Test, measure and maintain in the post-go-live world.
- Cast an eye to the future through road maps.

Learn to Operate Against a Backdrop of Change

Now that the new system is launched, performance expectations will be high, and in many ways the work has just begun. Staff should be ready to transition from the singular focus on a large event (going live) to a mode of many incremental improvements. Effective communication with colleagues on the fund office team, as well as with trustees and stakeholders, will reflect the fact that the work is not over.

After the initial system transition, a competing set of priorities demands attention, including:

- The punch list of details that were not completed in time for the launch date. This may include open issues that still need to be resolved and items that were never tested in the rush to meet the schedule.

- The backlog of changes and updates that are still in the queue to be developed and that fall somewhere between fund office staff and the vendor
- Deferred issues that came up while the team was locked into getting the system running. These were deferred with the excuse that “all hands are focused on the go-live deadline,” but that card has now expired. Hopefully someone kept track of this list.
- New issues that continue to emerge every day. They may be externally generated (because of a regulatory change or a new request from the auditors) or internally generated, to change an internal process or create a new member communications initiative, for example. Although difficult to anticipate, these changes will crop up.

A good approach to corral this continuous list is to:

- **Reconstruct the inventory of issues, tasks and projects/subprojects.** When combining the priorities in the four categories above, a long list of tasks with overlaps and dependencies will remain. Moreover, priorities will have changed dramatically over time. A first step should be to combine, reconcile and reprioritize everything.
- **Change from an event-driven plan to a calendar-driven plan.** Prior to the conversion to a new system, schedules and resources were probably all related to the steps leading up to that go-live date. An important transition to the steady-state world is to adopt a calendar-driven mindset. What tasks fall into this quarter? What issues need to be resolved prior to year-end? The calendar year will become the basis for planning, and annual, quarterly and month-end deadlines are the taskmaster.

Change User Behavior (the People Challenge)

The days and weeks directly after a system launch may be the riskiest and most trying moments the fund office will face. Inevitably, unexpected challenges will emerge because of people’s behaviors. The technology may work as designed, but the fund office staff may not be ready for the abrupt change. Perhaps they did not realize how much they depended on old habits developed over the years on a familiar system.

The key to mitigating this risk is to practice/train the users before they attempt to perform daily operations. That

said, no matter how much training is provided, fund office staff will not be fully prepared until the system is operational and the staff is using it. Whether the system makes only minor adjustments in the way the fund operates or forces wholesale changes to the organization, ongoing efficiencies are entirely dependent on having the right people with the right skills in the right jobs.

- **Recruit and retain the right complement of staff.** In the fund office environment, this challenge should not be underestimated. Most fund offices don't have dedicated IT staff, internal project managers and program management offices, yet having these skill sets is critical to a successful platform modernization program.
- **Fill the skill gaps with supplemental resources as needed.** Depending on the scale of internal resources, an external service provider can help fill in the gaps as the team comes up to speed.
- **Appoint super users in each department.** Super users can act as ambassadors and model the behavior. These individuals should have the interest and aptitude to adjust quickly to the new system and also command the respect of long-tenured staff.
- **Create healthy competition.** Some organizations find creating programs that include an element of competition amongst key groups or departments can accelerate transition to the new system.
- **Put it on individual goal lists.** Incorporate targets related to a

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smooth systems transition at the individual level, at least for key team members. This will motivate employees to model the right behavior.

Keep Requirements in Sync With the System

Two important accomplishments offered critical support for a successful system deployment and should be internalized beyond the go-live date: detailed documentation of system requirements and rigorous cleansing of legacy data. Both initiatives demanded big investments, and much of the value will be lost if the effort to keep things up to date does not continue. Unfortunately, without the urgency and visibility of an implementation effort, it is hard to keep people focused on these areas. Fund offices should not allow requirements and data to slip to the bottom of the priority pile.

The upside to documented business and functional requirements is that they provide the playbook for how the fund office works—from plan rules and calculations to daily/weekly business processes. The downside is that without ongoing effort to keep those documents up to date, they will quickly become obsolete. It is extremely tempting to skip disciplined documentation as tweaks and updates are made after

going live. However, as soon as these documents become inaccurate, they lose their value as a reference for how things are supposed to work.

To get the most from the investment, documentation should become part of the business process. Requirements can serve as the basis for ongoing testing and validation of the system or be incorporated into the training/onboarding process. New staff should be able to learn all about the fund office by reading through the requirements, and experienced staff can use these reference materials whenever questions arise (for example, “What is the rule for members who retired early under the special merger rules for 1992?”).

Keep the Data as Good as It Was on Day One

Data integrity offers a similar challenge. The conversion process to the new system probably involved an excruciating effort to reconcile names, dates, addresses and various historical records. On day one of system launch, the data is pristine. On day two, tempting shortcuts crop up that can corrupt the data. Why does this happen? Sometimes it is expedient to edit amounts without going through a complete set of correcting transactions, or the temptation is to get clever and use a date field to indicate a special condition

takeaways

- After going live with a new information technology platform, fund offices need a strategy for keeping the system running smoothly and efficiently.
- Even after the system is implemented, fund offices will still have open projects, including changes and updates to the system and unresolved issues that must be prioritized and addressed.
- Those who use the system likely will require more training, and outside resources may be needed to fill in skills gaps as staff gets up to speed.
- Funds should work to maintain the integrity of system data and avoid shortcuts to ensure the new system retains its value.
- Continual testing and monitoring of application and usage of the system will help fund offices detect problems and avoid system failures.

(e.g., a death date 12/31/1900 means this person is an expelled member). Data is the lifeblood of the fund office. It is worth the extra effort to record the details of every transaction and to take the time to create new fields and codes when needed. If the data is good, all other projects, whether the creation of a mailing list or new valuation model, will be greatly simplified.

Therefore, two steps to ensure all of the hard work continues to yield the value it did on day one are:

1. **Put requirements documentation to work as part of daily operations.** This will make the value obvious to everyone in the office and will help escalate the priority of the maintenance needed to keep requirements accurate.
2. **Continually monitor data quality.** Run regular exception reports that test for errors or “out-of-bound” conditions (identify members who are under the age of 15 or over the age of 125). Find the sources of data pollution (it could be users or it could be other systems) and fix them.

Testing, Measurement and Maintenance in the Post-Go-Live World

In a mission-critical environment, continuity and uptime are the top priorities. Funds should be ready to keep watch over the system and implementation processes that will detect problems before they escalate into failure modes. Think about a car’s dashboard, with its gauges and warning lights that monitor the workings of the engine and prompt the owner to perform maintenance or head directly to a repair shop. What is the system equivalent? How can an appropriate level of instrumentation be implemented?

Testing is always a hot topic leading up to a system launch. But it cannot stop there. First of all, changes to the system are still being made—probably many small changes. And the ability to make changes rapidly is dependent on the ability to test and verify at the same pace. Test plans should be reconstituted into repeatable modules that will be used over and over as the system evolves.

Application monitoring is another flavor of testing that becomes more im-

portant after the system is live. Monitoring tools and processes are great early warning systems that alert users to problems before they escalate. Approaches to monitoring can range from very simple to very sophisticated, but the unifying purpose is to keep track of whether something has changed unexpectedly. A simple example is a tool that continually checks connectivity with the system (an uptime test) and sends an alert if and when it loses connection. More complex versions of the tool track performance (How long does it take to log in? How long does it take to run a standard report?).

Usage monitoring is a third domain that supports the steady-state operation. Whether the methodology is sophisticated or simple, it is important to keep track of how employees are using the system. How many people, and at what hours? Are usage patterns as expected, or are people doing unexpected things? Are users manually double-checking what the system calculates because they do not trust it? The more that is known about how the system is being used, the more user needs can be anticipated and correctly prioritized in the long list of open issues. After all, what is the utility of fixing a feature that nobody uses?

Here are a few guiding principles fund offices can use to meet the goal of continuous system improvement in the post-go-live environment:

- Build repeatable test cases. This is a task that can be assigned to either business line or IT staff, but the key is to create processes that can be executed rapidly and independently.
- Implement application-monitoring tools and create regular re-

ports and alerts. It is not possible to manage well without measurement. Commit to measuring performance and incorporate those early warning systems.

- Study how users interact with the system, and learn from that. The information gathered from this regular practice should be what drives new feature requests or system enhancements. Period.

Keep an Eye Toward the Future (Through Road Maps)

It is easy to become consumed with this week's challenges and very difficult to anticipate next year's needs. Even so, taking a long-term view is important, if only to inform short-term decisions about people, processes and technology. What does the IT road map look like? How often should it be updated? The answers depend on the characteristics of the individual fund and its capacity for change. Regardless, integrating the IT road map into the annual planning effort is a must. To that end, funds should:

- Create an IT mission statement that describes the fund's approach to technology infrastructure and data. Use the statement to champion plans and drive home its importance to provide excellent member service.
- Define a five-year platform and data road map, at least at a high level.
- Create a development road map that goes out every 24 months and update it regularly (semiannually at a minimum).

Conclusion

The bottom line is that return on investment for a new technology platform will be found in a combination of greater process efficiencies, reduced risk of downtime or data errors and a variety of enhanced member services.

Though it is not possible to predict the future, every fund office is destined to operate in a dynamic environment rife with regulation and oversight. It is no easy task to keep up with the daily challenges, let alone implement a major change in technology without significant disruption. With the proper selection, planning, care and ongoing attention to detail, fund administrators can make it through the transition and be much better equipped to respond to whatever comes next. 

bio



Michael J. Goldberger is a co-founder and partner at MIDIOR Consulting in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he leads the technology services practice area.

With his depth of technology and development experience, he supports clients in selecting the appropriate technology platforms for their business objectives, resulting in higher return on investment, improved efficiencies and better service to plan participants. Goldberger holds a B.S.E.E. degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).