ONE AT A TIME

Focus on each individual if you want a successful integration project, says Graham Oakes.

Graham Oakes: change happens only when people change

"There are no IT projects, only business projects with an IT component."

How often have you heard that? On the face of it, it seems a sensible thing to say. It reminds people that they must focus their attention on the needs of the wider organisation that provides context for their project.

For integration projects, this is particularly relevant: the diversity of business units and roles you have to deal with probably at least matches the diversity of technical systems.

You will need to talk to people from a wide range of units, define a common vocabulary, converge on a common definition of services, find ways to get different processes to interact with each other, and so on. Being reminded of the need to deal with this wider context is a good thing.

On the other hand, this focus on 'the business' – that abstract wider organisation – draws people's attention outwards. You can get pulled into discussions of enterprise architecture, of process models, of best practices and standards, of the grand vision.

Yet none of these things create change. Change happens only when people change. Someone comes into work one day and does something slightly different to what they did yesterday. Repeat that a thousand times over, and the organisation changes.

All that other stuff – the architectures and the processes, the visions and the standards – is useful only if it helps to trigger that initial human change.

It seems to me that this is the real objective of most projects – to bring these triggers for change into action. If at the same time you can create a supportive context, then there's a chance people will begin to create useful organisational change.

It's easy to lose sight of this. Faced with all the complexities of the typical integration project, it's easy to get focused on the technical details.

Understanding legacy systems is hard. Keeping up-to-date with new technologies is a constant challenge. Converting a spaghetti of ill-defined interfaces and connectors into a vaguely coherent system would try just about anyone's patience.

When someone tries to remind you that this is a business project, not an IT one, they're probably trying to help you gain perspective on the mess. But they're pointing you in the wrong direction.

Jerry Weinberg once said: "Change happens one person at a time." If you lose sight of that one person, of the collective group of one persons that make up your organisation, then change doesn't happen. Or at least, not the change people were hoping for. All projects are, first and foremost, people projects.

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