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Making It Work: Customer Relationship Management Implementation Issues Before, During, and After Launch

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Introduction

For all the focus a company might put on choosing the right customer relationship management (CRM) system, an even more important emphasis should be on thoroughly planning the implementation of that system. After all, as important as the characteristics and capabilities of CRM software may be, they are of little importance if they are not effectively utilized by the organization's employees.

CRM implementation planning should begin well before the launch of the CRM system. In fact, some preliminary implementation planning may even influence the choice of CRM software, including the decision of whether to go with an installed or a hosted CRM product.

This white paper will examine several key implementation issues that need to be addressed before, during, and after CRM system launch. These issues are wide-ranging, but the overarching principle that links them is that CRM implementation should not be thought of in the narrow scope of an IT installation project, but as a broader program of increasing orientation toward customers throughout the organization.

Before CRM System Launch

The following are implementation planning issues that should be addressed before CRM system launch-and in some cases, even before the selection of the new CRM software.

1. Define scope. Naturally, management thinks of a CRM system in terms of the sales force and customer service team as users. These functions should be the primary focus of a CRM strategy, but limiting that strategy to direct customer-contact roles may be selling short the full capabilities of a CRM system. An organization should consider how the CRM system might benefit all other areas of the firm. Examples could include operations personnel using the system for project management, and the finance department using it for billing or profitability analysis. Comprehensive use of a CRM system can improve communication throughout the organization, and make the customer always the focus of that communication. How broadly the scope of a CRM project is defined will impact not only what features to look for in CRM software but possibly whether to go with an installed or hosted CRM product. A hosted CRM product may have certain advantages where multiple locations are being covered, and when the number of users is prone to fluctuations.

2. Define roles and segment training groups. While a certain amount of project-wide orientation will be common across all user groups, it is a good idea to segment groups as much as possible so training can be specialized and focused according to each group's functions.

3. Look for cross-training opportunities to minimize down time. As important as it is to define roles and structure training accordingly, it can also enhance productivity if the firm looks for complementary functions that can be cross-trained as a way of dealing with slow periods. For example, a customer-service department that can be trained to make outbound calls when incoming call volume is slow will be more productive than one which just has representatives sitting idle at such times. A CRM system can help organize tasks so workers can always find something to do, and can readily put different tools (e.g., selling scripts, service reminders, etc.) in the hands of employees to help them shift functions when dictated by demand.

4. Use the vendor. A company acquiring a CRM package should lean on the vendor for as much training advice, instruction, and material as possible, and the ability of a CRM vendor to provide training assistance might be a factor in selection.

5. Identify user experts. Each department will often have one person who takes the lead in adapting to new technologies. People with this level of interest and aptitude should be singled out for special training, so they can assist their peers through the training process and act as an ongoing resource to answer questions and solve problems once the program is rolled out.

During CRM System Launch

Listed below are some things an organization should do while it is rolling out the CRM project to its employees.

1. Communicate a customer-centric mission. Before employees get absorbed in the details of how to use the CRM system, the organization should communicate its vision for how it expects that system to help serve customers better. This will create a context that will enable employees to get more out of the more detailed training to come.

2. Communicate self-interest. Besides the ultimate mission of serving the customer base more effectively, employees need to know what's in it for them. CRM systems generally benefit employees in a number of ways, whether it is more commission opportunities for sales reps, greater ease of use for customer service agents, or streamlined reporting capabilities for managers. Communicating to all training groups how the CRM can benefit them will help motivate the employee base.

3. Limit group sizes. Small groups work best for training. They create an environment more conducive to asking questions, and people tend to feel more accountable for learning material if they have a strong sense that the instruction is being directed at them.

4. Have trainers take a personal approach. Trainers should humanize the training sessions as much as possible, so employees will relate to them and consider them accessible if they have questions.

5. Emphasize hands-on trial runs. Passive learning is not very effective for trainees, and it leaves the trainers with no sense of how much of the material has been retained. Involving all trainees with hands-on practice runs will engage them in the training process and help trainers spot which employees need extra help.

After CRM System Launch

Once the software has been made available on everyone's desk and the trainers have left the building, the real work begins. The first few months will probably determine whether employees build their work processes around the CRM system, or whether it just becomes a forgotten resource. Listed below are some steps a company can take to encourage more thorough CRM adoption.

1. Monitor data. It is very important in the first few months to use reports and spot-checks to see how much data is being entered, whether entries are coming in consistently from across the employee base, and that the proper conventions and formats are being used.

2. Measure and motivate. As much as possible, measure how much individuals are using the CRM software, and create incentives and competitions to spur greater usage.

3. Take a generational perspective. Some employees may be reluctant to change their established ways, but a company can make sure that new employees are thoroughly trained to use the CRM system properly from day one. If new employees are well trained, then adoption of the CRM system will increase steadily over time, as the work force grows and turns over.

CRM Implementation Case Studies

The following examples show how companies used some of the processes described above to encourage CRM adoption:

• Aeris.net, a wireless communications company, realized the benefits of defining CRM scope more broadly than just the sales and customer service departments when it adopted its NetSuite CRM system. By training personnel across departments on an enterprise-wide system, Aeris.net was able to improve communication between departments and create efficiencies which saved the company at least $200,000.

• New England Controls, a supplier of control systems for automated manufacturing processes, was able to use Soffront's CRM system to create metrics that became the basis for formalizing business processes across the organization. The results were more consistent implementation and automation of some processes. This demonstrates once again the communications benefit of defining a broad scope, and also shows how monitoring and measuring can help drive behavior.

• The Australian Finance Group (AFG) wanted to increase the customer service orientation of its network of 2100 different broker organizations to encourage more repeat business. Already viewed by this network as a sales tool, the Oracle Siebel CRM was tapped to launch targeted customer contacts that will prompt a more systematic approach to customer service throughout the broker network. By motivating the broker network based on its self-interest (i.e., enhanced commission opportunities) AFG was able to use its CRM system to change behaviors across a network that otherwise would have been too vast to influence greatly.

Conclusion

When CRM training is approached as part of a broader customer relationship management emphasis throughout an organization, that organization can get more out of it than just the use of new software. It can be the foundation of an enterprise-wide customer service orientation that will help the organization be more competitive in getting and retaining business.

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