Laying the Foundation for Change
How a Collaborative Study of Real Companies Helped Shape Expressworks' Distinctive Methodology for Change Initiatives

As they entered a San Francisco conference room in late 1998, senior operational, human resources and project managers from six major California companies had good reason to be curious. For four months these representatives of AirTouch Communications, California State Automobile Association, Chevron Corporation, Lucent Technologies, PacBell Directory, and Pacific Gas & Electric Company had been part of a unique cooperative effort. With San Jose-based consulting firm Expressworks International, they had actively participated in a study that explored the crucial subject of major organizational change and deployment. And today, they would hear findings they hoped would be of great value to their companies in the months and years to come.

A "Best Practice" Deployment Process

The study was conceived and designed by Expressworks with a very specific objective in mind. "We wanted to develop a 'best practice' deployment process," said the firm's co-founder Peter Lohnberg. "We identified, among participating companies, key success factors, critical implementation steps and ways to measure major implementation efforts. The ultimate goal, of course, is to share these findings with organizations serious about improving the ways they deploy major business initiatives."

Expressworks, which has focused on helping companies deploy major corporate initiatives, such as work process redesigns, since the early 1980s, viewed the study as a logical extension of its work. "We already saw ourselves as experienced in this area," said the firm's other founder, Mark Bernardi.

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"But, to gain additional insight into why some deployments succeed and others don't, we examined recent initiatives with which we weren't connected. That way we could document and analyze deployment processes from a more impartial perspective."

As Expressworks began to recruit companies for the study, "we were pleased with the variety and caliber of companies that chose to participate," said Robyn Holt, who, in her role as an Expressworks Senior Consultant, coordinated the study. "The positive response shows that many companies see effective deployment as one of the most important challenges their organizations face today. And, when you realize that 50-to-80 percent of all major corporate initiatives fall short of their goals, you can understand the interest in our study. From our experience, this failure rate is due more to the poor execution of good ideas rather than a lack of good ideas. We see a growing body of evidence suggesting that effective deployment of initiatives needs to be a core management competency."

No surprise, then, that the study participants were eager to reap the benefits of Expressworks' findings and recommendations. The presentation began with an overview of the study. Expressworks analyzed six initiatives ranging from the implementation of re-engineered business processes to the deployment of a product brand repositioning strategy. Total investments varied from a few hundred thousand dollars to over fifty million dollars. The numbers of employees affected by the initiatives ranged from a few hundred to more than one hundred thousand. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with a cross section of both the individuals driving the change and those people whose work was most affected by it.

"We looked at deployment success from two points of view," explained Holt. "First, we were interested in the extent to which the company considered it had achieved the original business intent of the initiative as measured by gains in revenue, productivity or efficiency. Second, we were interested in the extent to which Those Most Affected By the Initiative, (TMABIs) - usually operational leadership and frontline employees - felt the changes had made their work easier, faster or more efficient. We also wanted to know what legacy had been left behind, either positive or negative, as a result of the deployment strategies or implementation actions undertaken in bringing about the changes. In other words, to what extent might employees embrace or resist the next initiative?"

Key Success Factors

Expressworks outlined the nine key success factors that had clearly correlated to deployment success. Several of them, according to Holt, were fairly obvious. "Experienced managers will recognize that things such as a dedicated and competent leader, appropriate funding, and the visible support of senior management are essential," she noted. But, what interested Expressworks more were findings which, while more subtle, had a significant impact on deployment success. Three of them made especially strong impressions.

The first of these was a "clear, unambiguous business intent." In presenting this success factor to the study participants, the Expressworks team explained that companies which focused their efforts in the early stages on researching and articulating a strong business case, set the stage for more focused and effective deployment strategies. Giving employees and other stakeholders the "why," - the legitimate business reason for change using factual, compelling words and pictures, is an important first step in deployment.

"We found it helped greatly if companies articulated the business case not only in terms of added value to customers or the bottom line, but also in terms of usefulness to work performers," pointed out Holt. "It seems obvious in hindsight, but when companies deployed a solution which actually helped work performers give better service, reduce cycle time or cut

information bottlenecks, deployment efforts were much more successful."

The next success factor which made a strong impression on Expressworks was "Respect and empathy for Those Most Affected By the Initiative (TMABIs)." While this might seem self-evident, those involved in the study soon came to understand that it was filled with more subtle implications. The more respect and empathy people involved in the design and deployment of a new initiative had for TMABIs and the work TMABIs did, the harder they worked to create opportunities for dialogue and interaction. They worked harder to remove barriers that made adopting and sustaining the changes difficult for TMABIs.

"If there's one point I'd like to make to companies it's this," stressed Holt. "When genuine respect and empathy for the impact of changes on the personal and work lives of TMABIs is lacking, there is real danger that false assumptions will be made about what will and won't work from a deployment standpoint. If a deployment strategy and action plan are based on inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes, there is a good chance the implementation will fail. It is a paradox that is often lost on management,"

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she continued. "Even if the initiative being deployed is an unpopular one with TMABIs, perhaps because it involves a headcount reduction or relocation, it is still imperative to demonstrate empathy by showing genuine concern for helping TMABIs move forward and adjust to the new reality of a company that wants to get the changes implemented successfully."

The third success factor that Expressworks found made a significant difference was "early and meaningful engagement of operational/field personnel." Its most visible benefit is the opportunity to create ongoing dialogue between those driving the initiative and those who will be impacted by it, usually operational and/or field personnel and their leadership.

Working together as early as possible in the design of new products, services, or processes as well as in the planning of implementation strategies and tactics is a major contributor to deployment success. In most cases, it is the operational and field people who DO the actual work of implementation, i.e., making it happen in real time. An added benefit is the establishment of a continuous feedback loop that proves invaluable in making adjustments to strategies and plans. On a less visible level, a conscious transfer of responsibility is also taking place; operational and field personnel are actively committing to the initiative's success.

An Initiative's Lifecycle

Later in the presentation, Expressworks co-founder, Mark Bernardi, gave the study participants an in-depth look into the life cycle of initiatives.

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"We've found," Bernardi told the audience, "that a typical initiative life cycle can be divided into four distinct stages: Solution Finding, Design & Development, Implementation, and Stabilization." A common error in many organizations is to focus all their attention and effort in the Solution Finding and Design & Development phases on giving substance to the "what" of the solution. Only then do they begin to address the myriad of implementation issues associated with deploying a major change across large numbers of work performers and/or multiple locations.

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"It's as if they see implementation as a completely separate activity that happens only when Design & Development are completed rather than as an integrated design and deployment planning (What and How) effort prior to the actual implementation," explained Bernardi. "As a result, problems emerge which often sabotage the best intentions of people to implement effectively."

A far more successful approach, Expressworks found, is for organizations to undertake key deployment activities from the very beginning of the initiative. "Deployment-savvy companies begin thinking and planning around deployment issues as soon as the basic solution has been agreed to," Bernardi pointed out. Best-in-class companies start dealing with the people and work practice issues associated with a major change as early as possible. They communicate openly, candidly, and regularly about the changes. They engage the TMABIs in addressing what needs to be done and in overcoming barriers to implementation. They plan and set measurable deployment goals, then monitor and report their progress. "This," Bernardi said, "allows a group to move into the implementation phase with both greater momentum and a much clearer sense of what really needs to be done. It's a far more productive, far more sensible way to get the results you want."

Later in his presentation, Bernardi outlined five essential elements of deployment and identified a number of best practices for each element during the lifecycle of an initiative. The five essential elements of deployment are: Planning, Communication, Engagement, Measurement, and Reinforcement. Bernardi went on to provide a best practice for each essential element as it applied to the appropriate lifecycle phase. For example, in the Solution Finding phase, a communication best practice would be "crafting and telling a simple, yet powerful story to decision makers and stakeholders about the need for change and the viability of the chosen solution." In the Implementation phase, a communication best practice would be "setting up multiple, systematic, two-way communication links to share information about progress to plan, common problems and fixes, effects on current business and success stories." Throughout the presentation, stories and examples from the companies participating in the study were used to illustrate key points.

Strong Foundation Points to Next Steps

At the end of the session, the study's participants said that both the experience of being involved in the study and the findings themselves would be useful to their organizations.

Voicing a sentiment shared by many who attended, Tracey Borst, Executive Director - Human Resources for AirTouch Communications, said: "Corporations are under tremendous pressures to adapt these days. While they're fairly good at designing new organizational initiatives, most are just beginning to understand what implementation really means. It's a process which requires discipline and concerted effort, and we need to know more about it. This study has helped us to focus more closely on many of the critical issues, especially those relating to the TMABIs. The findings are going to be of real value."

Many also saw the study as a foundation for developing more refined deployment strategies, tactics, and tools. Several participants expressed interest in continuing to work with Expressworks to develop tools to address the five deployment elements. "There's a major opportunity to develop deployment tools that could eventually become standards for business practice," said Dom Siababa of Pacific Gas & Electric Company.

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"We're pleased with the insights this study provided to all those involved," Expressworks' Peter Lohnberg said. "But there is still much to do. We'd like to use this study as the basis for continued research into the unique nature of deployment. As we do, we'd also like to help more organizations become sensitive to deployment challenges and the enormous benefits of doing deployment well."

A Discipline Whose Time Has Come

"When you think about it," added Bernardi, "every management discipline has its time - that moment when it becomes widely noticed, accepted, and applied. We think that the time for more advanced deployment strategies, tactics, and tools has arrived. The organizations that excel here will greatly increase their chances of success in the years ahead."

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