

Integration Requires Collaboration

By Steven Crooke



At Reveal, we spend a great deal of time touting the virtues of a truly integrated supply chain supported by the best (in our opinion) integrated supply chain ERP system available – SAP®. Too often, in searching for solutions for an ailing supply chain, people are consumed by what they do not know about the technology. Organizations search only for technical solutions that involve training and quick tips on a variety of transaction codes. The belief seems to be that, with the knowledge of just one more T-code, they will be better equipped to address all the issues in their supply chain and put their company on the path to integrated supply chain success. While we recognize that, in most cases, their intentions are pure, their solution to “fixing” an ailing supply chain is little more involved than a spot fix. In fact, in most cases we have found the problem may not involve a technical fix at all. We find the primary challenge most organizations face is not to fix their system. The challenge is that they invested in an ERP system for the integration but forgot (or were not told) that the system requires organizational collaboration to operate it. In other words, integration requires collaboration.

Why Collaboration Matters

Collaboration is achieved by a set of human behaviors that align with the tools that we use. Said another way, we need the tool — and a process for using the tool if we are to achieve integration success. In the supply chain context, your ERP manages the business operations of your entire enterprise and in the case of SAP, thousands of business enterprises across the globe. If used correctly, it is the ultimate system for the integration of an enterprise.

We are evangelists about learning as much as you can about SAP and understanding how it can be best leveraged to effectively run your business and provide valuable information for decision-making. Learn all you can, but realize that SAP requires collaboration with people and your organization's business behaviors to allow your supply chain to function optimally. Look for ways to enable human behaviors that align with how SAP operates and facilitates the real-time accuracy of data in your enterprise — as reflected in your SAP system. Recognize that the toughest part of using a system like SAP is accepting that we, as humans, may have to change some of the ways we do things.

Achieving Integration

Anticipating some readers of this believe a technical system should change to meet your needs, recall that ERP systems like SAP have been created and iterated over years to include the majority of best business practices and a myriad of processes that can support your organization. With that said, in some cases you may have to manipulate the system a little to get it to fit exactly. ERPs are rarely a one-size-fits-all solution to everything. We are simply suggesting you consider that, instead of its creating an acrimonious relationship between "IT" and "business" where they system is the bad guy, the system was, in fact, designed to enhance integration and collaboration.

Also recognize that the primary challenge standing between where you are today and seamless integration in your supply chain may not actually be a bad or broken system. You may need to look for opportunities to adopt different human behaviors, change some of your company's processes and reevaluate your organizational alignment. We have found a key area for performance improvement and system integration is establishing cross-functional organizational teams. These teams, consisting of functional representation from across the supply chain, are able to make decisions that ensure real-time performance and enforce change to address challenges including business behavior conflicts, master data inaccuracies and seek process improvement opportunities. Consider spending as much time trying to learn how to use your system (aligning behavior and business rules in the system) as you do learning the system (functional and technical capabilities). Embrace the potential for changing your processes as a gateway to leveraging the value out of your system solution. Meet the system halfway, and you will be surprised at how much easier your life could be.

Steven Crooke is a senior partner at Reveal. Reveal helps transform SAP-centric Supply Chains to run better. Contact Reveal at info@revealvalue.com (mailto:info@revealvalue.com) to learn more about the collaboration you need between your SAP system and your supply chain.