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FINANCE

How Douglas County's Finance Team Learned to Collaborate While Implementing ERP

BY KATIE LUDWIG

Reflecting back on Douglas County's road to implementing a new enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, County Clerk Jamie Shew and Chief Deputy County Clerk Marni Penrod agreed that the project's greatest benefit may have had less to do with technology and much more to do with establishing a new standard for departmental collaboration. This new way of working together began with the implementation of the ERP system and has endured, even as the county is adapting to more remote operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic and as it plans for implementation of a new tax system.

The County Clerk's Office is responsible for paying all of the county claims and

payroll for county employees. The office also helps fill out the Homestead and Food Sales Tax forms. As an agent for the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism, it provides fish and hunting licenses, park permits, and boat permits. In addition, the County Clerk's Office is responsible for all national, state and local elections conducted in Douglas County.

In Kansas, counties have both an elected Treasurer and an elected Clerk. As Jamie explains, the Treasurer is generally responsible for funds coming into the county, while his office is responsible for funds going out of the county (accounts payable and payroll). The budget also sits in his office, from a legislative perspective, but the County Administrator's Office plays a major

role in developing and monitoring the budget. The county Administrator also oversees all human resource functions.

Douglas County first started having discussions about implementing an ERP system around 2006. Jamie was relatively new in his role as the County Clerk at that time, as was County Treasurer Paula Gilchrist. Then the 2007-2008 Great Recession hit, leading the county to put the project on hold. Once the county started to recover financially, the project started back up again in 2010. One of the first steps the county took was to engage GFOA in a consulting role to help to prepare the organization for the project and help with procuring the new system.

GFOA stressed the importance of project governance to the Douglas County leadership, and Jamie and Marni believe the governance structure was a key to the success of the ERP implementation. At the highest level, the Steering Committee—which included Jamie, Treasurer Paula Gilchrist, IT Director Jim Lawson, and County Administrator Sarah Plinsky—managed the overall direction of the project. The Project Team was made up of subject-matter experts who managed the day-to-day ground-level tasks to make sure the project kept moving forward and that all of the county's needs were being met. The Project Team also had primary decision-making authority for questions and issues related to system implantation and configuration. As the project manager, Marni served as the bridge between the two groups.

"It did take a little bit for the Steering Committee to say we're going to give those decisions to this group of people...it requires your upper level management, both the elected and non-elected, to kind of cede some authority for it to really work," Jamie says.

The ERP system went live in June 2015, so the county has been using it for a little more than five years. With the increased pressure to conduct business remotely that the COVID-19 pandemic

has created, Jamie and Marni are grateful for the new technology.

"With the ERP, we've been able to operate remotely. We've been able to pay bills remotely, do payroll remotely, and there was no way we could have done that if we hadn't gone through the ERP," Jamie says.

Marni wholeheartedly agrees. "If we hadn't had our new system in place, we would have had a lot more trouble trying to work remotely. I don't know how we would have done it."

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– County Clerk Jamie Shew

In addition, they both believe that an even greater benefit of the project might be how it transformed the way departments collaborate. They attribute this transformation to the fact that many departments participated in the planning and implementation of the system.

"Within every department were all kinds of paper-based systems. So, it wasn't just implementing an ERP. It was a complete change of how we operate," Jamie explains. "The implementation of the ERP was difficult, but I think the change management part was probably more difficult because it wasn't just that I could make a decision and say, 'Okay, we're going to do this.' It had to include the Treasurer's Office agreeing, and the

Clerk's Office agreeing, and the Administrator agreeing."

Marni acknowledged that having so many high-level stakeholders involved in a project can be challenging, but she believes the extra effort is worthwhile. "It means the idea has to be good enough to go through all three before it's going to happen. It slows us down sometimes, but overall I think it means we get to the better decision."

The process for making decisions on when to go live with the new system was a good example of how the Steering Committee deliberated. "Each person brought to the table what they thought was important to go live, and...anytime you go live, not everything's going to be functional. There is some point when you have to say, 'We're going,' and that required a lot of conversation and compromise because to each one of us, the deal breaker in going live was different," Jamie explains.

Marni also believes the fact that all departments are now using the same ERP system encourages continued collaboration. "One of the best things about our new system is that we're all using the same system, and we're integrated...if we're going to change something, we all have to know about it, because it affects each of us—which is sometimes harder, but overall, it's better."

Because the project governance structure served them well throughout the ERP implementation project, the county has kept the structure in place. "The Steering Committee has evolved now into kind of a Finance Steering Committee that's gone beyond just the ERP," said Jamie. He explains how this group meets regularly to discuss finance topics. "I think we learned that getting around that table and talking was really important," he added.

"I'm really glad that we kept meeting as a Steering Committee...You guys were working together and talking but having the actual project to kind of knit it together officially was different," Marni adds.

They added that the idea for the new tax system originated in these Finance Steering Committee meetings. “We use those lessons now. We’re going through a new tax system implementation, and we’re using a lot of the lessons we learned in the ERP project on that implementation,” Marni says.

Marni feels that another benefit of the ERP implementation project was the business process mapping that the county undertook before procuring and beginning implementation of a new system. The purpose of the business process mapping was to gain a clear understanding of how processes work so the project team could start having productive conversations about how to improve them.

“I’ve worked here a long time, and I thought I knew more or less what everybody did,” she says. “I learned so much about the other departments, and I think that was critical in setting us up to work together—that we first learned more about what we do right now and what each other does, and then, in that process, we talked about the things we wanted to keep and the things we wanted to change.”



With a population of approximately 122,000, **Douglas County** is the fifth most populous county in Kansas. The City of Lawrence, home of the University of Kansas, is the county seat. The County Commission consists of three commissioners. Other local elected officials include the District Attorney, the Register of Deeds, the Sheriff, the Treasurer, and the County Clerk.



County Clerk Jamie Shew (left) and Chief Deputy County Clerk Marni Penrod attribute the new ERP system with establishing a new standard for departmental collaboration in Douglas County.

Jamie agrees that the business process mapping was beneficial. Elaborating on how important it was to have departments other than those that deal with finance and human resources in those meetings, he says, “When we started business process mapping, we realized there are departments that should be at this table that we hadn’t thought of. We naturally thought of the Treasurer, and the Clerk’s Office, and the Administrator, but we realized that the Sheriff, for example, is probably one of the biggest users. They’re the biggest department. They have the most personnel...So we needed to have somebody from the Sheriff’s Department at that table.”

Similarly, staff from the Public Works Department also served on the Project Team. “Public Works are a huge user of the finance system. Having their voice was really important because part of this system was a time management system, which we’d never had—we were going from paper timesheets to clocking in and clocking out. We didn’t think of how the road crew clocks in and clocks out. I think having that voice was really important.”

Just as the ERP Steering Committee morphed into a broader Finance Steering Committee that still meets regularly, the ERP Project Team also continues to meet monthly. “That’s the time when I tell them anything that we might have changed, like in the structure of our finance system, or a new thing we’re trying, or an update that’s

coming, but I also tell them anything that I know about that’s just changing in the county, or maybe a new hire, or change in a department structure, and then they all have a chance to talk to each other,” Marni says. The group paused meeting for a couple months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has started meeting again via Zoom.

“We’re trying to figure it out. I think we are managing, but we can do better, and personally, I’m learning more about being flexible. People are answering my emails at 10 p.m. because they can, and I’m used to being able to call somebody or email them and they’re going to be there and I’m going to get the answer,” Marni says. “I’m more old-school than some, but we’re figuring it out.”

Marni elaborated on the communication challenges that the pandemic has caused for her. “I’m used to popping up from my desk and walking out toward the other staff and saying, ‘Can I interrupt you for a minute? I have a question,’ and we all just talk for five minutes, and then I go back to my desk.” She notes that “way too many emails” have taken the place of these informal, unscheduled interactions. As a way of addressing this, she is planning to try using the Slack app with her team. Staff working on the implementation of the new tax system have been using it with good results, and Marni is hopeful that it can be useful with her team as well. ■

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