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Setting Up to Fail: The Case of Midwest MBA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A mantra of experienced project managers is "failing to plan = planning to fail." In the case of Midwest MBA, a user group is not satisfied with the progress made by the central computing staff on the development of a much-needed information system. In a well-intentioned effort to help the users, the IS staff of the end user area (who had been acting in a liaison role between the user area and central computing) decided to take on the completion of the system. However, the resources needed to absorb this additional project were never accurately estimated, obtained, or allocated. Moreover, tasks and target dates were never firmly established.

Although the decision to take on the completion of the system was a noble one, the IS staff ended up providing a demonstration of the project manager mantra. Not only was the system not completed, but the IS staff's regular duties suffered as well. Animosity between the IS staff and users became rampant and both parties considered the system to be a failure.

Put simply, the IS staff was not dealing in reality. And, as a result, they set themselves up to fail. This case is based on actual events in a real organization. We have, however, changed the identities of the parties involved and other key information to preserve anonymity.

BACKGROUND

Midwest MBA is the administrative division responsible for managing the MBA program in a large Midwestern U.S. public university. The MBA program has existed for many years and is nationally renowned. Midwest MBA attracts students from throughout the United States as well as students from around the world. Currently, about three hundred of approximately seven hundred fifty applicants are accepted into the two-year program annually.

The university currently employs a hybrid IS organizational structure. A central computing group provides an enterprise-wide database and technology infrastructure, and decentralized IS staffs are located within many business units of the university. Midwest MBA is one of the business units that has its own IS staff.

Midwest MBA is chaired by Harry Headhoncho, a professor from the School of Business faculty. He receives release time from most teaching and research duties to manage the program. Headhoncho is primarily involved in fund-raising, public relations, and the general promotion of Midwest MBA, as opposed to details associated with the daily operation of the program. Much of Headhoncho's time is spent away from the office on local and worldwide travel.

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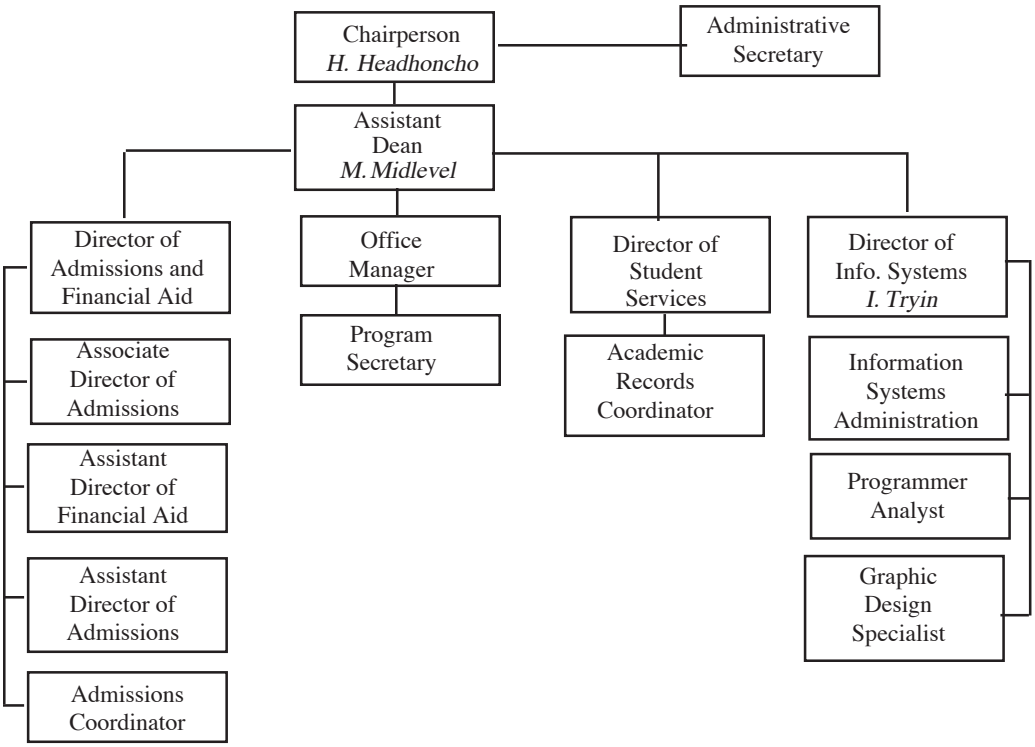
Figure 1: Organizational Chart of MBA, Inc.



Reporting directly to this chair is the assistant dean of the program, Melvin Midlevel, who manages the day-to-day operations of Midwest MBA. The assistant dean has a staff of thirteen people, divided into four functional areas: Admissions/Financial Aid, Student Services, Information Systems, and Office Management. The mix of professional and clerical staff is approximately equal. Figure 1 shows the organizational chart, minus several 12 hour/week graduate assistants allocated to the department.

The staff of Midwest MBA takes pride in knowing their students. One of the major goals of Midwest MBA is to track every relevant piece of information about a student, from the time the student first requests an information packet to the time he or she leaves the program and obtains employment. This information helps the staff to provide personal, high-quality service to prospective and enrolled students, as well as alumni of the program. The staff also uses this information to respond to queries by various internal and external organizations, such as accreditation groups and the graduate school of the university. The information is vital in recruiting new students and working with the many groups that rank MBA programs. A large coordination effort is required of the functional areas of Midwest MBA to collect this data and facilitate needed access to it.

As one can imagine, it can be quite time-consuming to amalgamate the volume of information needed when dealing with about six hundred enrolled students at any given time. The Student Services area alone is required to produce over 30 reports per year. The admissions report is typically

Table 1: Sample of reports needed by Midwest MBA

Examples of reports:
- Admissions Report (weekly)
- Academic Progress Report (Jan)
- Problem Enrollment Report (Apr)
- Parent Mailing of Hotel Information (May)
- U.S. Citizens by Ethnic Group Report (Aug)

over thirty pages long and is run weekly for use by the Midwest MBA chairperson and assistant dean. A representative sample of required reports is provided in Table 1. Simply stated, Midwest MBA is an information intensive operation.

SETTING THE STAGE

Until the late 1980's, almost all student data were kept in paper folders within Midwest MBA's offices. Each student folder contained information such as demographic data, application materials, and grade reports. Some information was collected directly from the student, whereas other data were collected from outside sources such as employers and other university offices. Due to the sheer volume of data, it was difficult to assemble meaningful reports. However, in the increasingly competitive market of MBA programs, the staff felt the need to collect even more student information for Midwest MBA to gain an advantage in student recruitment and placement. To accomplish this, Midwest MBA recognized the need to computerize information processing as much as possible.

The Silver Bullet

At about the same time Midwest MBA was acknowledging its need for an extensive computer information system, the university's central computing services group (CCS) approached Midwest MBA with an offer to create a student tracking system for their use. CCS hoped to create a model system that they could then sell to similar programs across campus and to other universities. CCS agreed to design and implement *gratis* a system to meet the tracking and reporting needs of Midwest MBA. In other words, CCS had walked in to Midwest MBA and offered to provide the solution to their problems — for free! After meeting several times to discuss requirements, CCS was commissioned to create the Student Tracking System (STS) in June, 1991, with delivery due in nine months.

Midwest MBA did not have regular dealings with CCS in the past, and little was known about what they should expect from CCS for product and service. Midwest MBA's director of information systems, Ima Tryin, had worked for CCS many years prior, but was unfamiliar with CCS' current personnel and initiatives. Midwest MBA's computing services were primarily supported by their own IS staff.

CCS had several problems developing the system. Some problems were technical, some were managerial, and some resulted from a lack of qualified personnel. Regardless of the source of the problems, CCS failed miserably in delivering the system on time to Midwest MBA. Certain parts were delivered but had obviously not been thoroughly tested. Some of the programs did not compile correctly, some had problems getting data from the database, and others had significant logic errors. Well into 1994, CCS had made no significant progress towards a completed STS.

Unfortunately, the demands of the marketplace and regulators do not wait for computer systems to catch up. Midwest MBA's support staff was overwhelmed in trying to keep up with information needs. Makeshift systems were created with spreadsheets and word processors by individual workers. Of course, such uncoordinated end user computing caused terrific problems in data consistency as different people made changes at different times to different files. Reports issued by people in Midwest MBA used data sets that were so different that one wondered whether the individuals were working in the same organization. This was clearly not acceptable to the regulators and other customers of information from Midwest MBA. The Director of Information Systems, Ima Tryin, decided something must be done to remedy the situation.

Biting the Bullet

In an attempt to move Midwest MBA closer to the implementation of the central data source inherent in the STS application, Ima Tryin began working with the parts of STS that had been delivered. The parts of the system that the Admissions group needed were further along than those needed for Student Services, so Ima decided (with Midlevel's approval) to roll the system out to the users in stages. Admissions would be brought online first, and Student Services would follow later. This would make sense for two reasons: students need to be admitted before they can be serviced, and the Admissions parts of STS were much closer to completion than the Student Services modules.

A major problem that plagued Ima in phasing in parts of STS was the inaccessibility of the source code. CCS, protecting its intellectual property, refused to release the source code for STS to Midwest MBA until they signed off that the system was complete. However, Midwest MBA was not willing to accept the rather shoddy work of CCS as final. Ima, an adequate programmer herself, was trying to write patch programs to fix errors in the delivered STS modules so they would be useable, while waiting for CCS to debug the original STS code. She was mostly successful at writing patches, but it became increasingly difficult to maintain the patches when new module versions were frequently received from CCS. Writing the patches was also time consuming, as Ima had to guess at parts of the code because she didn't have the source code to work from.

In the meantime, users were becoming disgruntled. For over three years, they had been told that a completed STS was "just a few months away" from implementation. Their jobs were becoming increasingly data-driven, but they did not have the electronic information support they so desperately needed. Because many of the users didn't know the whole story of who was actually creating the system, tempers flared toward anyone whose job was tied to computer support. This obviously included Ima and her staff. Ima was clearly on the front line as she was writing patches to get the Admissions staff up and running electronically. This, to most users, made her appear to be responsible for the STS development and thus liable for any and all delays which had occurred.

The maintenance and patches to STS had become a monstrosity. In desperation, Melvin Midlevel and Ima Tryin decided to sign off and accept whatever had been completed on STS to date. This would enable them to get the actual source code and make the necessary modifications. In July 1995, Midwest MBA relieved CCS of any further responsibility for the system by accepting delivery of the entire system "as is." Though STS was by no means ready, Midlevel and Tryin decided it was worth the sacrifice to Midwest MBA to obtain the source code and have the implementation of STS under their own control.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The IS staff of Midwest MBA began to rewrite code and fix many of the flaws within STS. This was a major undertaking, one to which no additional resources were allocated. Not surprisingly, other responsibilities of Midwest MBA's IS staff began to be neglected or postponed. Users who depended on the IS staff for technical support became increasingly upset with the inability of the IS staff to perform their maintenance and support duties in a timely and effective manner, as they had always done in the past. Furthermore, the IS staff was nowhere near completing all of the work to be done on STS and fixing all of the problems (some of which were still being discovered).

Adding insult to injury, Midwest MBA's employees attributed all problems with STS to their own IS staff because the IS staff was now completely responsible for the system. Whereas the users and IS staff of Midwest MBA had enjoyed a good working relationship prior to taking on this project, the relationship was now strained and showing distinct signs of hostility. This is reflected in comments from the Director of Student Services regarding the IS staff:

> *"Sometimes I wonder what they do all day. Requests get turned in, but I never see any results. It's like a big black hole. Things have been promised to us for years, but we have learned to accept that they won't get done. This system is more of an impediment to our job than a help."*

The IS staff members of Midwest MBA were also upset with the situation. Night and weekend work became commonplace in an effort to get the STS application up and running as soon as possible. The normal full-time workload of the IS staff was now augmented by the repair work needed to make STS a working reality. While the IS department was eager to make STS work correctly and function for Midwest MBA, there were only so many hours in a day. The IS staff became somewhat testy in their own right when dealing with the users. According to a member of Midwest MBA's IS staff:

> *"We have been going above and beyond the call of duty, working nights and weekends, to create a useable product and instead of thanking us they're griping about us."*

Things were so bad that sometimes when IS staff members were working on the STS project at home, they were accused by some users of slacking off and avoiding work. Likewise, several members of the IS staff were quite critical of the roles played by some members of the user group and openly questioned their team commitment versus desire for personal gain. Although users were asked to identify high priority pieces of STS and critical need-by dates, no additional IS resources were allocated to the effort. Hence, the IS staff became expert performers in the "juggling of burning sticks," delaying the inevitable fire.

In the beginning, CCS had been guilty of not meeting established deadlines and quality expectations. Now, the IS staff of Midwest MBA was becoming the guilty party because they failed to develop and communicate a realistic plan for the completion of STS. The project was never broken into pieces, no time estimates were generated for the tasks to be done, individuals were not given direct responsibility nor allocated time to complete this work, and target dates and deadlines were not established. Melvin Midlevel did not help the situation. He continued to tell the users "success is just a few months away," while telling the IS department "take as much time as you need," "be sure you get it right," and "you'll be getting new staff members shortly."

Unsatisfied with the progress being made by the IS staff, in March 1996, the directors of the Admissions/Financial Aid and the Student Services departments (along with the Office Management director) decided to complain to higher authorities. They went to Ivana Beking, the associate dean of the School of Business, to complain about the lack of progress on the STS implementation. They complained bitterly about the system they had been promised for over five years and wanted someone in power to do something about it. Ivana Beking responded by hiring a consultant to study the problem and determine what should be done about the STS application.

Surprisingly, when the consultant interviewed members of the IS staff and user areas in Midwest MBA, neither party reported a problem with the other party. That is, the users did not indicate the IS staff was at fault and the IS staff did not indicate that the users were at fault. Rather, at this point in time, every member of the IS staff and user areas felt that Melvin Midlevel (the direct superior of the directors of IS, Admissions/Financial Aid, and Student Services) was to blame for the failure of the STS project. They indicated that his tendency to "manage by problem avoidance" resulted in unclear direction and provided no help in problem resolution. In the words of the Director of Student Services:

"This office is allowed to run like a ship without a rudder. We need a rudder."

Indeed, by the end of his investigation, it was evident to the consultant that this really was not a technical system problem; it was a management problem.

The consultant met with Ivana Beking and Melvin Midlevel in July 1996 to discuss his findings. All agreed that the IS staff had the expertise needed to complete the STS implementation, but that Midlevel would need to take a more aggressive approach to managing the effort and allocating resources to it. No official sanctions were levied against anyone.

Upon speaking with members of both user and IS staffs several months later (in November 1996), it appeared nothing had changed. The IS department was still understaffed for the STS project and in need of official direction from Midlevel. And, although the STS was slowly getting better, it was not yet completed. User and IS staffs were both still frustrated with the situation.

SUMMARY

Midwest MBA is an organization with problems on many fronts. Technology in this case is simply a medium for the fronts, a battleground for the organization's members. Identifying this as a technology problem is akin to calling poker a card game; while technically correct, it misses much of the substance at hand. While the silver bullet solution proposed by CCS might work in some organizations, the structure here was not established to support it. Resources were few, tempers were short, and a strong leader, a rudder, was absent from the organization. What would be next?

APPENDIX A - CHRONOLOGY OF THE CASE OF MIDWEST MBA

June 1991	- CCS commissioned to create STS, due date March 1992.
March 1992	- STS not yet ready.
March 1993	- STS still not ready, just “a few more months away”.
July 1994	- Some modules of STS delivered, not all working. Patches created by Tryin.
July 1995	- STS accepted “as-is”, source code received by Tryin.
March 1996	- Group of Midwest MBA employees seeks help from Beking.
June 1996	- Consultant brought in by Beking to assess current situation.

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