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Chapter II

Laurier IT Priorities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The newly appointed IT officer at a smaller Canadian university must reassess her priorities. Given her mandate by a president who has just left, she wonders what the direction of the new president will be. With two months on the job, she has found things to be quite different from what she had originally understood. In particular, the administrative computing system has serious problems and is not Year 2000 compliant. Furthermore, it is heavily customised and there is no documentation of the changes. Resources are an issue, as there is little slack for new initiatives. She has identified many problem areas requiring attention. At this time she is unsure of the seriousness of these problems and how much effort will be required to resolve them. How can she quickly prioritise these issues so she can start dealing with the most important ones?

INTRODUCTION

Rene felt uncomfortable about her role and somewhat confused about the many problems facing the information technology (IT) group at Laurier. She wished she had ten years of experience with IT management and projects, so she could draw upon past experience and knowledge to sort out priorities, identify necessary projects, define major steps, staff appropriately, determine budgets, find required funding, and provide the needed leadership.

Foremost on Rene's mind was the situation with Laurier's administrative software package, called SCT Banner.[1] The vendor was bringing out a new release shortly, and would then drop support for Laurier's release. Upgrading from 2.0 would not be easy, as a tremendous amount of customisation had been incorporated into the system. None of this customisation had been documented. Exacerbating the situation were Year 2000 concerns. Rene's exposure and understanding of the system were minimal—she had never worked with the package, and had little involvement in the original installation.

She looked down at the consultant's report on her desk, which briefly outlined concerns with the university's Human Resource Information System (HRIS) and a plan for migrating it to the current version. The HRIS was one of four Banner modules that needed upgrading, and the estimated cost for this one system was more than $100K for consulting costs alone. On top of that would be hardware costs, as the new system would require moving from a centralised architecture to client/server. The entire IT upgrade budget for this year was $270K, most of which was already spent on other high priority items. Upgrading a single module would not benefit Laurier, as Banner was an integrated system—either it should be left alone, or the entire system upgraded or replaced.

Rene picked up the briefing report (see Appendix I) she had presented to the President's Group several weeks earlier as she prepared to formally assume the IT Officer position and take over responsibility for two departments providing campus IT services. At that time her priorities seemed so clear. Now she was much less certain about the ability of the Information Systems (IS) Department to handle anything new, and she was getting involved at a much deeper level than she had anticipated. In particular, little progress was being made on short-term initiatives she had assigned to IS. These were small tasks compared to the Banner upgrade.

BACKGROUND

Wilfrid Laurier University (Laurier) is situated in Ontario, Canada. It is primarily an undergraduate liberal arts university, with two professional schools (Business & Economics, and Social Work). There are more than 6000 full-time undergraduates, as well as some 1,500 part-time students and several hundred graduate students. Laurier has some 285 full-time academic staff and more than 800 employees in total. Its annual budget approaches $60 million.

IT Group Organisation

Laurier's IT group comprises three departments and some 30 people. IS looks after administrative computing, maintaining existing applications, and developing and/or implementing new ones. Computing and Communication Services (CCS) looks after academic computing plus the university technology infrastructure (central computer system including network, user support, and phone system). Audio Visual Resources (AVR) is the third department. CCS and IS have Directors who report to Rene. The AV Manager reports to the CCS Director. Figure 1 shows the organisational structure of the University, and where IT fits in. Historically, IS and CCS had reported to different Vice Presidents. Now they reported to the IT Officer.

Rene was recently appointed Laurier's first IT Officer, with a mandate to develop and implement an IT strategy for the university, merge the two separate departments, and