The need for optimization: Getting the most from Microsoft Dynamics GP

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July 2017

Microsoft Dynamics® GP is a powerful, full-featured enterprise resource planning (ERP) system that is used by more than 50,000 businesses and organizations worldwide. By implementing Dynamics GP, companies anticipate that they will achieve the typical goals of improved access to data, better reporting and analytics, and lower costs through greater efficiency. Dynamics GP certainly has the capability to deliver on that promise. With the new licensing model that began with the release of Dynamics GP 2013, the starter pack functionality includes a long list of modules and reporting and development tools that software purchasers have access to:

Financial management	Supply chain management	Human resource management
▪ General ledger with AFA ▪ Account-level security ▪ Cash flow management ▪ Fixed asset management ▪ Multicurrency management ▪ Analytical accounting ▪ Revenue and expense deferrals ▪ Bank reconciliation ▪ Electronic banking suite ▪ Safe pay ▪ Cashbook bank management ▪ Electronic bank management ▪ Electronic reconciliation management ▪ Payables management ▪ Receivables management ▪ Customer and vendor consolidations ▪ Lockbox processing ▪ Refund checks ▪ Grant management ▪ Encumbrance management ▪ Field-level security ▪ Dynamics process server	▪ Invoicing ▪ Sales order processing ▪ Extended pricing ▪ Order management ▪ Inventory control ▪ Bill of materials ▪ Purchase order (PO) processing and receiving ▪ Landed cost ▪ PO generator ▪ Requisition management ▪ Time and expense	▪ Human resources unlimited employees ▪ Payroll (U.S.) unlimited employees ▪ Payroll (Canada) unlimited employees ▪ Payroll direct deposit ▪ Federal magnetic media ▪ Payroll connect ▪ Position control ▪ HRM self-service suite
Business intelligence and reporting	**Configuration and development**	**Workspace collaboration**
▪ Unlimited management reporter designer users ▪ Unlimited management reporter viewer users ▪ Analysis cubes library ▪ Advanced analysis cubes library	▪ Modifier with Visual Basic ▪ Customization site license ▪ Integration manager—conversions ▪ Connector for Microsoft Dynamics	▪ Unlimited business portal users ▪ Unlimited employee self-service users

In most implementation projects, however, the focus is on implementing those modules and features that will enable the company to complete their essential business processes at go live. Time, money and resource constraints mean that additional features that are considered "nice to haves" are relegated to a vaguely defined phase two or phase three project. Within that narrow implementation focus, training and testing tasks are further restricted to those with relevance to the desired end-state business processes. While that focus may be appropriate and necessary, and contribute to a successful implementation project, it can, in the long run, be problematic.

Personnel changes and attrition can mean that even the limited knowledge gained during the initial training and testing phases erodes over time. Without retraining, users become less efficient, less aware of the features available to them and often more dependent on workarounds that circumvent the system and its controls. At the same time, business conditions may create the need to revise business processes. The system configuration conceived during the initial implementation may be wholly inadequate to support the new processes, but the original settings and configuration are maintained, because the users don't understand the impact and fear the consequences. Over time, the result is an inefficient and vastly underutilized system.

What to look for

Inefficiencies can manifest themselves in several ways. Among the telltale signs are:

1. Schedules and reports maintained outside the financial system — If users are relying on Excel to create reports or maintain schedules, chances are those reports or schedules involve rekeying data or combining Dynamics GP data with data from outside sources in a multistep process. Users will often say that they think what they need should be available from the system, but they don't know how to produce it.
2. Paper-based processes — If work flow involves reviewing and approving paper documents, and no one can say with certainty where a document is in the process, there is an opportunity to improve efficiency.
3. Complaints about the system — Users who are inadequately trained, or their managers, will often point to the system as the source of the problem. They recognize the bottlenecks and know a better way must be available, but believe they are constrained by the system's limitations.

Usually, the signs are readily apparent and both the users and managers know they exist. They simply struggle to figure out how to go about resolving the underlying problems.

How to address the issues

A large percentage of perceived system issues can be resolved with additional training. Dynamics GP is a complex system, and to expect that any one user or group of users have a thorough understanding of not only what they have been taught, but also what other features are available, is unrealistic.

The list of significant new features added since the release of Dynamics GP2013R2 in the foundation and core modules alone includes:

Foundation	Financial	Purchasing	Sales
▪ Workflow document attachment ▪ Workflow email notifications and actions ▪ Word templates for batch approval workflow ▪ Workflow condition management ▪ SmartList import/export ▪ Power business intelligence (BI) reports on the home page ▪ Self service user type	▪ Batch approval workflow ▪ Reconcile inventory and bank reconciliation to the general ledger (GL) ▪ Copy/paste from Excel ▪ Reverse GL year-end close ▪ Combined GL inquiry	▪ Purchasing All-in-One view ▪ Credit card payment option ▪ Payables transaction approval workflow ▪ Payables vendor approval workflow ▪ Purchase requisition approval workflow	▪ Deposit cash receipt batches automatically ▪ Sales All-in-One view ▪ Receivables batch approval workflow ▪ Visual customer over credit limit function ▪ Suggested item functionality

Making sure that users are adequately trained is not just about new features; more importantly, it's about understanding their current issues and pain points, and developing a plan to address them. New features can be part of that plan, but just as often, it's a matter of employing existing functionality or changing a configuration option that provides real benefits. That's where working with an experienced implementation partner is essential. A good partner should be able to ask the right questions, understand your needs, differentiate training issues from true functionality gaps and work with your users to overcome them.

Training, however, is not always the answer; sometimes a tuneup is required. Bad or obsolete data may need to be removed or historical data archived, in order to improve system performance and user efficiency. Duplicate, inactive or improperly entered master records can slow down data entry and reporting, as can historical transaction details that are rarely accessed. Tools exist that your partner can employ to resolve bottlenecks and improve the flow of data.

At other times, an overhaul may be more appropriate. Perhaps the format of the chart of accounts no longer supports the organizational structure, new entities or foreign subsidiaries have been added or your basic business model has changed. In these circumstances, a fresh look at the business requirements and a new system design may be called for. Again, an experienced partner organization can conduct the requirements analysis, develop the design and manage the changes.

Finally, and to extend the car analogy once more, it may be time to add some new options. The constraints that originally delayed those phase two and phase three projects may have lifted, or a feature once considered a "nice to have" has become a "must have." The types of features that we see the most demand for include:

- Business intelligence (BI) and reporting
- Business performance management (BPM)
- Document management
- Accounts payable (AP) automation
- Procure to pay
- Workflow automation

In recent versions, Dynamics GP has added significant enhancements in most of these areas. BI and reporting are enhanced with the integration of SQL Reporting Services reports and the Microsoft Dynamics Business Analyzer. Document management capabilities are improved now that attachments are stored in the SQL database, rather than as just a link to the document, and workflow is added to processes such as batch approval, purchase order approval and employee onboarding. Where GP fails to meet specific requirements, independent software vendor (ISV) products are available to fill the gaps.

No mid-market ERP product matches the number and variety of third-party products that are available for Dynamics GP, and that does not include products in the BI and BPM space that will work with virtually any ERP system. Navigating the options and selecting and implementing a solution may involve not only Dynamics GP knowledge, but also consultants experienced with the integrating product. Adding these types of features can be significant projects, and requires the same type of care and consideration as the original implementation.

Conclusion

The investment you've made in Dynamics GP is significant, and maximizing it requires a periodic system review. Without it, the capabilities of the platform remain underutilized and both management and user frustration levels will increase. The goal of the review should not only be to uncover existing system issues, but also to understand how requirements or priorities have changed and what management's new vision for the system is.

The product of the review should be a picture of the current state, a picture of the future state and a detailed plan and estimate for how to bridge the gap. The optimization process requires collaboration with your Dynamics GP business partner. They should understand the issues and your vision and bring the product knowledge and resources required to the table to help you reach your goals.

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