How to Ensure Smooth Implementation of a New Benefits System

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Transitioning to a new benefits administration software solution is a significant decision. As your organization prepares to implement your new system, it is crucial to safeguard this major investment by taking steps now to avoid costly mistakes later. Develop comprehensive implementation roadmaps complete with critical-path milestones so that when it's time to flip the on-switch for the new software, the transition is smooth and the system functions exactly as expected.

Four proven strategies for a seamless benefits administration system implementation

In Segal's experience with assisting organizations with the implementation of new benefits administration systems, four steps are critically important to the project's success.

1. Gather all functional requirements

This first step is arguably the most integral step of the new software implementation. It lays a solid foundation for the project.

Outline and document all functional requirements of the system. This is the blueprint the vendor will follow as it begins programming. Most of this information should have been defined during the RFP process, but further clarifications or more defined user stories may be needed.

In most cases, these requirements are not simple. Typically, they require substantial analysis and comprehension, which usually means clarifying questions and sessions with the vendor's design and development teams. Use this time to work with the vendor to fully drill down your organization's expectations for the system.

As you work through this process, be sure to clearly track any new requirements or modifications to existing requirements. While some of this effort has likely already taken place during the procurement phase, requirements and specifications may change as the implementation develops.

Your vendor may consider some of your new requirements to be enhancements outside the scope of the original project. Determine whether this is the case at the outset to avoid surprise cost increases later on.

2. Clean your data before the system conversion

If your current system has data containing inconsistencies or invalid characters, the issues will only become worse as the new vendor loads the data into the new system.

Make a concerted effort to identify any potential issues. Consider and verify:

- Participants' personal identifiable information
- Retirement history
- Work/contribution history
- Eligibility

Carve out time early in the project to make the necessary corrections before the final data conversion into the new system. In addition, keep in mind that there may be data fields not in your old system that you may want added to the new one. This data needs to be provided to the vendor, and a plan to load it should be developed.

3. Create a detailed testing plan

Once you answer all questions about what the system needs to do, it's time to test those solutions. Laying out the rules is one thing — ensuring they are developed correctly is another. Modern systems are inherently complex. Most organizations have many employees whose responsibilities are interdependent and may have overlapping roles. However, those employees are not always aware that their responsibilities impact others. Ensuring that all processes are fluid is of paramount importance.

You need a detailed and thorough plan of action for testing each facet of the solution, eventually tying everything together as part of an end-to-end test of each process. Part of the plan should include the normal day-to-day practices of each area in the organization and should also account for one-off, out-of-the-blue situations that require workarounds or exception handling. Anticipating these potential issues reduces the need for reactive problem solving.

4. Train, train, train!

The adage "practice makes perfect" holds true in benefits administration system implementations. Part of the implementation project should include training sessions focused on how the end user will perform their work in the new system. These sessions should occur close to when the system will go live, so training won't be forgotten or grow stale. They should also be hands-on, because the more engaged your team is in the transition, the better the results will be.

Always require the vendor to include written system documentation, but be prepared to incorporate any changes into your existing standard operating procedures. Even after live or recorded sessions, dedicate time as the project flows to ensure the fundamentals and functions of the system are understood. If additional training sessions are needed, request them earlier rather than later.

Following these best practices sets up your implementation project for success

By following these four strategies, your organization can minimize delays and avoid common pitfalls in implementing a new benefits administration system. ◆

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