

Information Strategy: Staffing the Warehouse Project

by Jane Griffin

Data warehouses need constant maintenance. Therefore, at the inception, organizations must ensure that they have the appropriate staffing structure to support the building, management and maintenance of the data warehouse. Commitment to long-term staffing--which must meet or exceed the original commitment to actually build the data warehouse--is essential to its success. Roles and responsibilities of the warehouse management team must be clearly defined, and the people who fill those roles must be given the proper support and training. Whether the warehouse is built internally or by external consultants, eventually the responsibility of warehouse maintenance lies with the organization's internal resources.

It is critical that during every phase of the warehouse's construction, internal resources develop skills that will guide the warehouse team to independence from outside vendors, consultants and/or contractors and develop the expertise necessary to evolve with the data warehouse. The data warehouse team can make or break the project.

Supporting a data warehouse and its users requires a significant shift in thinking for most information technology (IT) staff. A warehousing project is of a scope and magnitude beyond the typical IT project--especially as far as financial risks and potential ROI. However, with proper motivation, mentoring, planning and patience, management can ensure that the warehouse team is prepared to provide the highest level of support necessary.

There are specific roles and responsibilities necessary to support a data warehousing initiative, and it is important that these roles and responsibilities be clearly defined at the outset. Some of the key roles within a data warehousing team include business analysts, data architects, information system services, end-user support, and leadership and management. These key roles perform the following functions on the team:

Business Analysts: Responsible for identifying and defining the warehouse purpose and target user group and ensuring that the warehouse meets the organization's strategic objectives.

Data Architects: Responsible for defining data collection, transformation, distribution and loading, as well as defining the data models that are the foundation of the warehouse.

Information Systems Services: Usually comprised of internal resources and numerous vendors, IS services is responsible for testing tools and assessing the need for expansion of the warehouse.

End-User Support: Responsible for allowing user reporting and access, as well as user training and support.

Leadership and Management: Responsible for sponsoring the warehouse and making it a priority within the organization, developing project plans and ensuring that the warehouse remains aligned with the business needs.

Coming together as a team, these groups ensure that the warehouse is being built for the right reasons and that the warehouse will actually meet the strategic goals of the business and still be manageable. The team must be as flexible as the warehouse itself, and both the warehouse and its support team must be responsive to the dynamic nature of the business.

Above and beyond any other role, effective project leadership and management can make the warehouse project a success or doom it to failure. An executive sponsor--a high-level business executive within the organization who visibly supports the data warehousing project and shows faith in the project team--can convince business users that there is value in the warehouse initiative and give the warehousing team the leverage they need to successfully complete the project. Project management is also necessary to develop project plans, to ensure that the construction of the warehouse continues to meet the business needs of the organization and to manage the initial focus and future expansion of the warehouse. Project management is also key in uniting all members of the warehouse team and keeping both morale and accomplishments high.

Since most data warehouse projects use the latest and greatest in technology, it is not usually difficult to excite the warehouse team, which is gaining valuable experience with new tools and techniques. More often, the challenge lies in exciting end users. While it is critical that users feel empowered to collect and analyze their own data through the warehouse, it is also essential they be coached, mentored and trained to use the new tools. Business users, after all, are why the warehouse team exists in the first place; and they often need education and special handling to take on their new role with confidence.

Investing in supporting and training end users pays big dividends. A confident user community and properly trained warehousing team greatly enhance an organization's return on investment. With the right team mix and proper support for the project, an organization's data warehouse can create a proactive environment in which business users independently gather accurate data to answer strategic business questions, taking the business beyond its original goals and expectations. And, as a byproduct, a cohesiveness between IT and the business community also develops. This bond is invaluable in moving the organization forward and ensuring that IT and business are

aligned on future projects.

When an organization decides to embark on a data warehousing project, no one--from tool vendors to the company's executive sponsor--makes a promise that it will be easy. Warehouse projects seldom are. They take time, money and commitment--commitment from a team of people who believe in how a warehouse can drive the business into the next millennium. Technology alone, no matter how sophisticated, won't move the project along. Warehousing initiatives take people to make them work, and those people must be a united team that covers every aspect of the project, from planning it to training the end users.

Easy? Not usually. However, organizations that assign key employees to specific and well-defined roles on the warehouse team, train them and provide them with good leadership and exceptional project management can go a long way toward ensuring a substantial return on investment from their warehouse.

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