



VP of IT Looks for Excellence in Business Improvement

by Pete Bartolik May 05, 2016

As head of IT at Lawson Products, a distributor to companies in the maintenance, repair and operations (MRO) market, Kevin Hoople is intensely focused on improving business processes.

Lawson relies on a large number of sales representatives – two-thirds of the total workforce of 1,500 – to keep tabs on the needs of some 70,000 customers, to deliver the right parts and even organize them in the customer’s site.

“A big part of what we do is a service component,” says Hoople, information technology vice president with the company. “If some manufacturing customers run short on a critical part – it could be as simple as a bolt – and their production line is shut down, it’s tremendously expensive for them.”

IT plays a critical role in providing the data to make business process improvement decisions. “We built a robust sales and supply-chain data warehouse that we use for a great deal of the decision,” Hoople says. “We’re really operating with facts and not with just conjecture.”



Kevin Hoople
VP of Information Technology
Lawson Products, Inc.

Center of Excellence

After implementing SAP’s ERP in 2011, Hoople led the creation of a Business Improvement Center (BIC) comprised of both IT and non-IT staff to collaborate on improvements to systems and processes. “In essence, this is a center of excellence approach to continuous improvement in IT systems,” he explains. “My goal was to leverage our investment in SAP (and other systems) by creating a cross-functional team.”

A key element of that group’s success, he adds, was ensuring representation of different levels of business leadership, including middle management and even sometimes line supervisors or system users. “Certainly senior leadership should be setting a strategic agenda for business change; however, if you stop there you really miss an opportunity,” Hoople says.

IT participants in the BIC are primarily business analysts, business intelligence analysts, and the IT managers that support them. “In the course of working with the BIC, the IT participants work on understanding the business issues – not just the technical challenges,” Hoople says. “They strive to understand the context and the overall business process being discussed. They act as trusted advisors to their business stakeholders.”

Core to business strategy

That involvement includes IT taking a seat at the table in the company’s implementation of Lean Six Sigma (LSS) methodology, which combines the principles of lean manufacturing and the Six Sigma process improvement techniques to systematically eliminate waste and variability through measurement and data analysis. LSS was initiated at the 64-year-old company at the beginning of 2013 by chief executive Michael G. DeCata, who was named CEO and president a few months earlier.

Hoople serves with other company process leaders in selecting LSS projects and members of his team have led two of the 10 projects currently underway or completed. He says it’s natural to draw IT staff into LSS projects. “They understand our business, they have an understanding of many of our processes, and as we progress through a given LSS project looking at solutions they will have insight into what IT system changes might be very easy to accomplish – and thus could be in scope for LSS – versus what should go on our IT roadmap.”

The BIC is a “perfect complement” to LSS, according to Hoople. “One of the reasons that my business analysts and BI analysts are asked to participate in LSS initiatives is because they really are viewed as partners,” he says.

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