Don’t be afraid to ask: Implementing "New Absalon

AUTHORS

Mike Thomas Floejborg, Tudskjærvej 37, DK-2720 Vanløse, mike.floejborg@adm.ku.dk
Peter Aagerup Jensen, Hovmarksbakken 11, DK-4174 Jystrup, paaj@adm.ku.dk

Title

Don’t be afraid to ask: Implementing "New Absalon".

Keywords

LMS, implementation, project management, change management, process design, organization

1. SUMMARY

This extended abstract describes the acquisition and implementation of a new learning management system (LMS) at the University of Copenhagen (UCPH) from 2014 to 2017. The project is generally acclaimed as a success. The extended abstract describes how success was achieved through a sustained focus on involvement, dialogue, and transparency.

2. ABSTRACT

Introduction

This extended abstract describes the acquisition and implementation of a new learning management system (LMS) at the University of Copenhagen (UCPH) from 2014 to 2017. A LMS is a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting and delivery of educational courses or training programs. We begin by giving a sketch of the background of “project New Absalon”. Next we outline the various phases of the project. We then proceed to offer examples of how we involved the organization and management in the project. We conclude by clarifying benefits that we reaped by organizing the project around the three keywords: involvement, dialogue, and transparency.

Background on UCPH and Absalon

Founded in 1479, UCPH is the oldest university in Denmark. It is located in four campus areas in central Copenhagen. The university has around 40,000 students and around 10,000 members of staff. It divides into six faculties and around 100 departments and research centers.

The LMS at UCPH is called Absalon. It is considered a business-critical system at UCPH, as it supports one of the University’s most important tasks: education. The name Absalon is a reference to a former Danish Archbishop, and is used irrespective of which particular LMS is used. The name works as a way of 'branding' e-learning at the University. From 2007-2016 the system behind Absalon was Itslearning. In 2016, as part of “project New Absalon” this system was replaced with Canvas, supplied by Instructure. The overall business responsibility for Absalon is located in Education Services (part of the university’s Central Administration). The Central Administration operates all IT systems and services that support uniform practices across the university’s faculties and departments.

In late 2014, management realized that the contract with Itslearning would soon expire (February 2017). Two years is not a lot of time to procure and implement a new system on a large University like UCPH, and UCPH does not have a long track record of fast and successful implementation processes.

A steering committee was organized, and the committee immediately faced a choice: Should the project be organized as a merely technical project, with a fast procurement and implementation process, or should it be organized with an emphasis on a wide-ranging involvement of the organization? Clearly, this would be more expensive and time consuming, but presumably also, in our opinion, lead to a better result.

We opted for the latter alternative and provided a detailed plan for how the project could be organized in such a way. We did this because we believe that the human factor is crucial, and that without organizational buy-in, the implementation of a new LMS would inevitably fail (Kousholt, 2014). Fortunately, the steering committee had faith in the plan that we proposed and the courage to authorize the project design.

Project phases

The project ran from 2014-2017 and comprised four project phases:

1. *A preliminary analysis phase* (business analysis, market dialogue, requirements specification, organizational analysis, etc.).

2. *A procurement phase* (an EU call-for-tenders process).

3. *An implementation phase* (divided into a technical track, where the new LMS, Canvas, was integrated into UCPH's IT landscape, and an organizational track, focused on ensuring that the university's organization would embrace the new LMS at all levels.

4. *An exit phase* (where the former LMS, Itslearning, was phased out, and where the project was shut down ensured a smooth transmission of the responsibility for the new LMS from the project organization to the operations (business) organization.

The below figure offers a sketch of the timeline of the project:

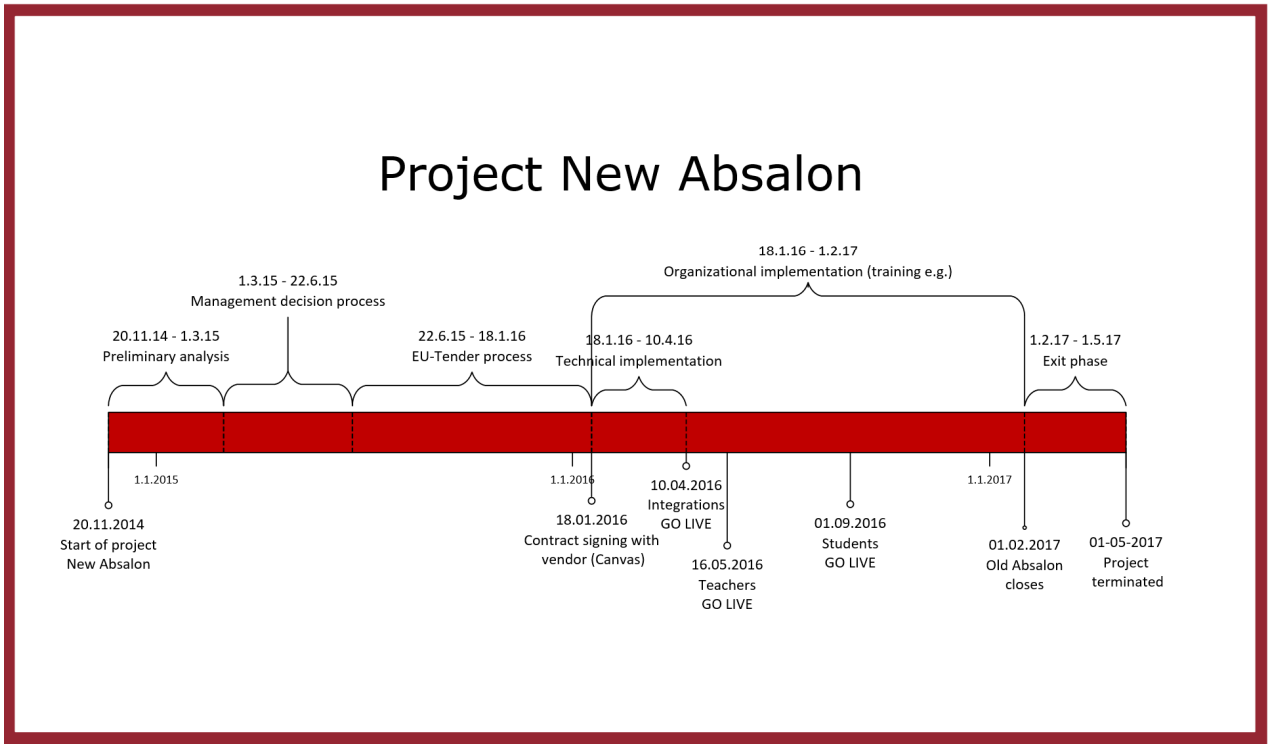

Figure 1: Timeline

Bringing the terms 'involvement, dialogue, and transparency' alive in the project

So how were the concepts of involvement, dialogue, and transparency brought alive in the project? At all times during the project, we aimed to secure maximum participation by stakeholders in the various project activities.

Below we provide four examples of how we did this:

1. In the preliminary analysis phase, we invited both staff and students to submit ideas and requirements for features and technical qualities in the new LMS. We set up an online forum to collect these various inputs.

2. At a later stage, the ideas and requirements we received were discussed and organized by key members of staff in reference groups in such a way that the most important of these could be included in the tender documents.

3. Normally, EU call-for-tenders are a purely 'written' process. In this project, though, we instructed the potential suppliers to provide UCPH with access to demo-environments of their LMSs as part of their tenders. When evaluating the tenders, we invited teachers, students and e-learning consultants from all six faculties to test the various systems. At the same time, we asked staff members in University IT to assess the various systems' technical properties. All views and assessments that were unearthed through this process were included in the final evaluations of the systems, and the winner was chosen in accordance with these inputs.

4. Throughout the project, instead of creating new forums, organizational units, and communication channels, we chose to use the organizational structures and communications channels that were already in place at the university. In this way, we aimed to acknowledge the existing organization rather than placing ourselves in opposition to it.

Besides involving stakeholders to the greatest extent possible, we continually endeavored to facilitate decisions in the steering committee in a way that likewise focused on involvement, dialogue and transparency. On the one hand, we secured the representation of all faculties and key departments across the university in the steering committee. On the other hand, we made sure that every steering committee meeting was well planned and professionally executed, and, even more importantly, that we spent a lot of time communicating on a one-on-one basis with all members of the committee to ensure that they were well informed, involved in and comfortable with all decisions throughout the project.

A thorough stakeholder analysis takes time, but it is a good investment. It made us aware of both friends and enemies of the project (Kousholt, 2012). We deliberately invited potential 'enemies', or skeptics, into the project, because we believed that sometimes 'your enemies are more important than your friends'. Some of these later became our strongest allies. It is a good idea to keep your friends close, but keep your enemies even closer. We also experienced that an individual's strength and influence, at the right levels and at the right time, can be crucial for success.

We consistently aimed to ensure a positive relationship between the organization and the project. If you want to transform an organization you must recognize - and use - the organization as it is (Schein, 1984). We were therefore very attentive to using the structures and groups that already existed in the organization (cf. point 4 above). That way we managed to acknowledge and value the organization and thereby to create a solid basis for a rewarding relationship with the organization. We made sure to design our project process in such a way as to include multiple dialogue-based activities; and when conducting these, we consistently aimed to be explicit (and thus, transparent) about our objectives and the process ahead. We never promised our stakeholders a particular result or outcome; only a transparent, respectful and carefully organized process. And people accepted that.

Another way that we tried to acknowledge the organization 'as it is' was to identify and address the various organizational 'narratives' that we met. For instance, we often heard stories about how the university's Central Administration showed no sensibility to the tasks and needs of the faculties and departments. Whether or not these narratives were true, we acknowledged and addressed them – again, to create a productive and respectful relationship with our stakeholders, thus ensuring that the organization would work with us, rather than against us.

Reaping the benefits

As noted, the project is generally acclaimed as a success. We will end this extended abstract by listing some of the benefits that we reaped by organizing the project around the concepts of involvement, dialogue, and transparency.

- The fact that, from the beginning, we aimed to establish a positive relationship with the organization (for instance, by continuously communicating and inviting people to participate in various project activities) generated a lot of goodwill. This was essential, and meant that we were able to secure the participation in the project of the right people.
- Throughout the project, participants and stakeholders have worked with dedication. According to a recently conducted project evaluation, this level of dedication was a direct result of the way the project was design around involvement, dialogue, and transparency.
- Besides conducting a project evaluation, we have also conducted a survey on user satisfaction with the new LMS. The verdict of both is clear: we got the right system and implemented it on time and budget, and without causing unnecessary vexation and unease in the organization.

It is our understanding that if we had conducted this project as a classic IT-delivery project, we would have met with considerable resistance. Even if we had succeeded in delivering on time and budget, it is unlikely that teachers and student would have received the system in as favorable a manner as in fact they did.

The project reached its goals by taking a consistently communicative and facilitative approach to project management and by sticking to a process design aimed to create and sustain fruitful human relationships and to acknowledge, appreciate, and make use of the university's own various organizational structures.

So in conclusion, we offer the following advice: use the organization - ask away! It may seem expensive, time-consuming, and possibly even tedious at first. But it will be worth the effort.

3. REFERENCES

Kousholt, B. (2014). *Forandringsledelse og forandringskommunikation*. København, Nyt Nordisk Forlag.

Kousholt, B. (2012). *Projektledelse - teori og praksis*. København, Nyt Nordisk Forlag.

Schein, E. H. (1984). *Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture*. Sloan Management Review.

Cooperride, D. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry*: *A Positive Revolution in Change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

4. AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Mike Thomas Floejborg, MA (Ed) in Educational Psychology, Special Advisor

Mike Thomas Floejborg works in Education Services in the Central Administration at the University of Copenhagen. He has been working as a project manager since 2008 (at the University of Copenhagen since 2013). He was the project manager of New Absalon and is a certified IPMA project manager and a certified Scrum Master.

Peter Aagerup Jensen, MA Communication and Modern History, Special Advisor

Peter Aagerup Jensen works in Education Services in the Central Administration at the University of Copenhagen. He has been a key figure in e-learning initiatives at the University of Copenhagen since 2005. Since 2009 he has been the Operational Systems Owner of the University of Copenhagen's learning management system. He is trained as a project manager and an organizational consultant.