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Chapter XIV

Teaching ERP with Microsoft Business Solutions — Great Plains™

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ABSTRACT

Enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems have become indispensable software systems for many corporations worldwide. As more and more companies implement ERP to support daily business transactions, the need for ERP trained employees are increasing as well. Industry demand has prompted many universities to consider incorporating ERP into their curricula. Information systems curriculum in many universities have started offering courses that include ERP education; however, most universities have faced multi-faceted challenges related to lab setup, training, software support, and curriculum design. In this chapter, a guideline for development and teaching an ERP based course with MS Great Plains™ is provided. Teaching approach is discussed and an ERP based business curriculum is proposed. Effectiveness of the curriculum design in the classroom is analyzed based on a single semester trial of the course in two classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive business environment, employers expect business graduates to understand business processes and underlying technologies that support them. As businesses are going global, the complexity of business processes and the interdependent relationships that are needed to support globalization are also going beyond traditional boundaries. Understanding of business processes is not complete without the proper knowledge of data flow associated with each business process. As Antonucci, Corbitt, Stewart, and Harris (2004) put it "As educators, we must bring the issues and practices of industry to the classroom" (p. 227). Traditional education methods are often task-oriented rather than process oriented (Boykin & Martz Jr., 2004). This creates a paradoxical situation where businesses demand new hires have knowledge and understanding of process so that they can take part in projects with minimal training and within the shortest possible time. Enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems software is used by most manufacturing and service organizations and is able to provide a comprehensive business process experience to students. ERP systems seamlessly integrate information generated and used by various functional departments within an organization, such as manufacturing, inventory control, accounting, purchasing, sales and marketing, finance and human resources. ERP systems provide accurate and real-time data, which is vital for a company's day-to-day business operations, decision making and ultimately, its success. Desire for data sharing among manufacturers, sellers, vendors, and customers is pushing manufacturers and vendors alike toward installing compatible systems such as ERP, supply-chain management (SCM) and customer-relationship management (CRM). Yet, according to Watson and Schneider (1999) "Most IS curricula do not provide significant coverage of ERP concepts, nor do they graduate students who are knowledgeable about these systems and the impact that these systems have on industry" (pp. 1-48).

Typically, an ERP system is supported by a single or multiple relational databases. Inclusion of ERP systems in the business curricula could essentially provide:

- Students with knowledge in management information systems that integrate and automate many of the business practices associated with the manufacturing, buying and selling operations of a company.
- Students with better understanding of how a business works within and across functional areas.
- Student opportunity to learn skills with high demand in the job market.
- Increased visibility of the academic program and thereby, increased visibility of students among business and industry leaders.

Corbitt & Mensching (2000) also mentioned several of the reasons above as objectives of an ERP implementation course. A conceptual diagram of ERP curriculum that shows integration of the Business Core is shown in Figure 1.

Large ERP software systems such as, SAP are being used by many universities into their curriculum (Antonucci, Corbitt, Stewart, & Harris, 2004; Boykin & Martz, 2004; Fedorowitz, Gelinas, Usoff, & Hachey, 2004; Hawking, McCarthy, & Stein, 2004; Johnson, Lorents, Morgan, & Ozmun, 2004). Instead of using a large and complex ERP software, we use a smaller business solution named Great Plains™. Great Plains is a Microsoft product that mainly targets small-to-medium size companies (SMEs). In this chapter, a guideline