Chapter XII

Wiring Watkins University:
Does IT Really Matter?

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Executive Summary

This case describes the "wiring" of Watkins University (a fictional name for a real Midwestern university) between 1997 and 2003 as the university responded to competitive pressures in the higher education market. After describing the University and the competitive challenges it faced, the case takes the student into a strategy session between the organization's CFO, CTO and Provost as they review progress on four key initiatives: Web based teaching, student laptop program, a Web based ERP implementation and a proposed "one card" system. Questions are raised as to acceptance of the technology, the impact of these initiatives on the organization's strategic posture and competitiveness, IT budget planning, and future steps for the organization to take.

Introduction

This case describes the "wiring" of Watkins University as a response to competitive pressures. The case is set in a strategy session as management reviews four key initiatives: Web based teaching, student laptop program, Web based ERP implementation and "one card" system. Questions addressed include acceptance of technology, the impact on the organization's strategic posture and competitiveness, and IT budgeting.

This case is based on the experience of a real university from 1997 to 2003. The name of the school, as well as enrollment and financial information, has been disguised to preserve the institution's anonymity. The general trends illustrated in the data, however, are consistent with real events.

Organizational Background

"It is time to convene the IT steering committee," said Loran Woodward. The executive conference room comfortably held the three members of the Watkins University IT steering committee and any invited visitors. Loran Woodward, a lifetime academic and engineer by training, served as Provost of the school and was responsible for the academic programs the school conducted. Lawrence Johnston was the school's Chief Technology Officer. He recently had left the IT industry to work for Watkins. Although he had earned a PhD in engineering many years ago, he was relatively new to the academic world in general and Watkins in particular. Johnson Lee was the Vice President of Administration. A veteran academic, Lee held a PhD in educational leadership and was a CPA. All three committee members dressed in dark suits, consistent with the conservative nature of the school.

It was late March of 2002 and winter had not left the campus yet. As the members of the committee shook off the cold, they faced the prospect of making hard choices on the school's 2003-2004 IT budget. There were many more IT initiatives than the school had funds to budget. Their challenge was to determine which initiatives and staffing decisions could help Watkins succeed in the increasingly competitive higher education marketplace. The school had recently hit a 15-year low in attendance and was just starting to turn the corner

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