

platform reform

CPM[®] Member shows how real estate firms can adopt single software solutions
by Lori Burger, CPM

Technology continues to change rapidly, and integrating new technologies seamlessly into any business has become more and more challenging. Today, our 37-year-old, family-owned company is one firm investing in technology so we can sail into the future with improved service capability.

Like most mid-size property management companies, the Eugene Burger Management Corporation has a diverse portfolio consisting of commercial office buildings, shopping centers, retail centers, single-family homes, assisted and conventional apartments, common interest developments, self-storage facilities and even a bowling alley.

From 1968 to 1996, through numerous client acquisitions, our organization inherited a myriad of software platforms and hardware systems. With nine regional offices and 500 employees located throughout California and Nevada, we concluded that the efforts to support numerous stand-alone systems, training of staff—along with the lack of connectivity and the inability to take advantage of database capabilities on a region-wide basis—was costly and inefficient.

Our firm maintains a narrow set of goals and objectives, and concentrates on reducing overhead expenses, eliminating redundancy and improving efficiencies by moving all aspects of its operations to one single, integrated database. Today our database is our most valuable tool and is an everyday essential that improves customer service and satisfaction. The ability to provide specific data tailored to our needs, as well as our clients, is what gives our company a competitive edge.

software challenge

Along the way, we found our company's portfolio mix was a challenge for

most accounting and property management software manufacturers. For example, a software manufacturer may excel in community association, residential or commercial property management and accounting, but is unable to meet the needs of assisted apartment communities. Rather than settle on a firm that can only handle part of our business or on multiple firms that specialize in unique areas, our goal would be to find one software firm to handle all of our needs. To get to where we are now, we enlisted a software consultant back in 1995 to assist us through various stages of the process.

The consultant began by first learning about our company's internal operations, like how staff currently performs their work versus how they envisioned doing their work in the future. Once the consultant had a clear understanding of the scope of work required, he began his search. After months of investigation, he identified

feature

several companies for us to interview. Upon selecting a software firm and beginning the implementation phase, we quickly found the firm had underestimated the complexity of our accounting and property management needs. In a short period of time, our company abandoned the implementation. While disappointing, there was no alternative but to continue the search.

Like other companies, we modified our accounting systems in preparing for Y2K, and continued our own search without a consultant. We reviewed many different software providers. Finally, in 2002, we selected Yardi Voyager. Yardi offered a global software solution well suited for our company.

BE SURE YOU HAVE AN INTERNAL TEAM FIRST EVALUATE ALL OF YOUR COMPANY'S COMPUTER HARDWARE, SOFTWARE AND STAFFING CAPABILITIES BEFORE EVEN CONSIDERING A FULL SOFTWARE CONVERSION.

It featured a fully integrated general ledger, property leasing and cost control features, and a centralized database that provides real-time access to property operations throughout the company's regional offices and residential communities. Best of all, Yardi was able to handle accounting needs for all property management types.

Though nearly all our needs were met, we did identify a weakness in Yardi's accounting and management functions for common-interest developments. To overcome this, we worked closely with Yardi to address these needs.

We brought together a team of employees from accounting, site management and executive management, charged with operating various district offices and ensuring a smooth transition.

During this time, we also focused attention on the expansion and adaptability of programs when evaluating the software packages. We believed it was critical

in the decision-making process to be assured that the programs and service provider selected would be available to service us well into the future.

transition implementation

With the right software programs for our needs, we were ready to start the transition process from our current systems to the new. Fortunately, we rec-

ognized simultaneous conversion of our diverse portfolio would be a significant challenge. With this in mind, we chose a slow transition, converting one property type and one office at a time. This allowed the company's implementation team to work out all of the special issues at one location before relocating resources to the next location. Additionally, it helped eliminate staff frustrations and any unnecessary down time needed to resolve complex issues.

We completed our goal of moving all property types into one single integrated accounting database in the fall of 2006. Our offices now have access to live data, and corporately, we have the ability to analyze activity throughout the company, anywhere, anytime. With this phase now complete, Yardi is adding functionality to the program to enhance its property management, banking, payroll, electronic delivery of financial information, electronic invoice viewing, legal tracking, maintenance and inventory controls, as well as others.

A last bit of advice—directly from our company president—is to be sure you have an internal team first evaluate all of your company's computer hardware, software and staffing capabilities before even considering a full software conversion. Eliminating stumbling blocks before the conversion process starts will streamline the conversion process and ensure smooth sailing ahead. □



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top 10 software strategies for accounting systems

- 1 Consider dedicating a team of employees to administer the conversion process. Nothing ever goes as smoothly as planned. Having a team to head up transitional challenges will be paramount to your company's implementation success.
- 2 Identify dedicated trainers. Once the new systems and programs are installed, the staff will need to be trained on how to use them. As staff turns over, it will require management time to train the new employees. Additionally, some employees may not be able to adjust to the new technologies even with training. Be prepared for the expense of one-on-one training costs and some unexpected staff turnover.
- 3 Involve all of the players early, including banking institutions to assist with upload conversions, software providers, trainers—and perhaps most critically—a team of support people who can address the myriad of user issues as the implementation takes place.
- 4 Do not underestimate the timeline for product conversion. Be flexible and be willing to provide the technical assistance where needed.
- 5 Keep in mind that out-of-the-box software will require some tweaking. Include additional funding in the budget to modify the products so that they work for you the way you intended them to. Know the software product modification limitations.
- 6 Take the time to convert your core operations first and have them operating smoothly before adding enhancements (extra modules). Enhancements may drastically change the way the company does business, e.g., electronic delivery of financial information, electronic invoice viewing, legal tracking, maintenance and inventory controls, etc.
- 7 Do not undervalue the abilities of consultants. While experts can be expensive, having one on your team during the implementation stage can be very rewarding.
- 8 Make sure the implementation team meets on a regular basis, either in person, by conference call or by webinar, to get outstanding issues addressed, courses of action identified and to identify who on the team will take ownership of each pending issue. This will assure the project moves forward and does not stagnate.
- 9 Keep things positive and provide frequent updates to the staff and to clients. There will be many times where the pressure from staff or clients to complete the project becomes exhaustive.
- 10 Find ways to reward those on your team instrumental in getting the job done.

advantages of integrating stand-alone offices into one software system:

- Company procedures can be centrally standardized and controlled.
- Upper management can analyze data for the entire company in one database.
- Upper management will have centralized check processing with payables entered from any location.
- Company procedures can include real-time accounting versus end-of-month posting to the general ledger.
- Managers can allocate workloads between offices due to staff shortage or staff changes.
- Staff will have flexibility to customize reports and menus for different operations within the company.