Ready, Set, Go Live: Ten Tips for a Smooth System Cutover

Liz Coyle
DELTAWRX

Any public safety agency that has replaced its core application software will attest to the careful planning and effort required to implement a new solution. The weeks leading up to cutover can be hectic, as agencies work with their vendor to refine system configurations, complete testing, train users, and make last minute bug fixes. But, what happens when it is finally time to flip the switch and go live? It is easy for the hours, days and weeks immediately before and after cutover to get lost in the shuffle as the baton is passed from implementation to long-term support. The following ten tips are distilled from sixteen years of experience working with public safety agencies across the country.

Before Go Live

1. Establish a Go Live Headquarters and Help Hotline

In larger coverage areas, "drive thru" help centers at satellite stations can provide a convenient method for field personnel to access support.

Dedicating a room with multiple, fully-functioning workstations and telephones provides an environment for trainers, project managers, and others to convene, reconfigure software as needed, and provide in person and phone-based support. In larger coverage areas, adding "drive thru" help centers at satellite stations can provide convenient alternatives for field-based personnel.

2. Publicize the Go Live Date and Approximate Time

It is important to inform end users and any impacted external agencies about the date and approximate time of Go Live, as well as the Help Hotline phone number and location of Go Live Headquarters. Communication with end users could also be used to establish performance expectations, and convey the understanding that while mistakes may happen in the short term, it is the responsibility of the user to report issues and seek assistance to move forward.

3. Confirm Go Live Roles and Responsibilities

Having a clear understanding of project team members, roles and responsibilities, including agency and non-agency personnel, provides for a more structured cutover environment. In addition to the agency's Project Manager, system administrators, and technical support staff, it can be helpful to involve at least one "super user" point of contact for each functional area on a round-the-clock basis during cutover. These individuals will triage problems and be capable of providing on-the-spot training and assistance to end users. Command Staff should be encouraged to frequent the Go Live Headquarters and be on call during cutover to provide leadership and general support. In addition, your vendor and project consultant should tell you which of their personnel will be onsite during cutover so you can perform any necessary security measures, such as background checks, in advance.

4. Order Food and Nametags

Providing snacks, drinks and lunch for your team will make an inevitably stressful environment a little more comfortable and help maintain a positive atmosphere. In addition, asking your vendor and project consultant to wear nametags will help end users get their attention when issues arise and can help facilitate communication as teams rotate throughout the day.

After Go Live

5. Protect Your Call Takers and Dispatchers

Excessive personnel on the dispatch floor can heighten an already stressful environment.

If your implementation includes a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) replacement, the dispatch center may be the most exciting place to be during cutover as the initial calls are received and units are dispatched. Take caution, however, because allowing excessive personnel on the floor can introduce unwanted noise and heighten an already stressful environment. Go live is not a spectator sport. Consider limiting the observation of call taking and dispatch operations to personnel who serve a meaningful purpose in the room.

6. Record and Track Issues

Task a specific person on your team with documenting all issues that arise. Your vendor's time is best spent fixing problems and providing on-the-spot training, so a better choice is either an agency representative or a consultant. Consider displaying a running list of issues on a screen in Go Live Headquarters and updating this list in real time so your entire team, vendor and consultants are aware of reported issues. For each issue, assign a priority level and a point person (typically someone from the vendor). Consider categorizing the issues as they accumulate (e.g. functional issues, hardware/network issues, internal policy issues, etc.). Issues that remain open in the days after Go Live should be categorized according to the error designations in the vendor's contract. No issue is too small to be tracked. If it is not documented, it is unlikely to get fixed.

7. Solicit Feedback from Users Throughout Go Live Week

To ensure that all issues are identified, the person responsible for tracking issues should proactively and persistently reach out to supervisors, super users and at least a sampling of end users to see if they have any issues to report. Unfortunately, your users will not always report issues unless they are specifically asked. In this instance, silence is not golden.

8. Review Open Issues at the End of Every Day

Schedule a wrap-up meeting at the end of every day during Go Live week to review open issues with the vendor and Project Team. Support personnel may be more motivated to resolve issues in a timely manner if they know they have to update the group at the end of the day. This time can also be used to add issues to the list and re-prioritize issues as necessary.

9. Require Confirmation Before Closing Issues

It is common for issues once thought to be resolved to reappear.

Do not close an issue until the individual or group of individuals who reported it has verified that it has indeed been resolved. This practice requires confirmation that the problem was correctly understood by support personnel and corrected as desired, and keeps users abreast of the issues' resolution. Users are more likely to report issues in the future if they know their efforts will lead to action. Instead of deleting issues when they are closed, document a brief synopsis of the resolution on the tracking log. It is common for issues once thought to be resolved to reappear, and it is helpful to keep old information as a reference.

10. Plan for Post Go Live Issue Tracking

Conduct a final meeting with your vendor and consultant to develop a plan for how issues should be reported in the coming days and weeks, as well as the best way to contact your vendor for urgent support. If issues will be reported via a vendor-supported platform, task one or more individuals with transferring the remaining open issues from the initial tracking log into the vendor's platform. In addition, review key thresholds and dates from your Acceptance Test Plan. While all contracts vary, your goal is to resolve all issues before making your final payment to the vendor.

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21700 Oxnard Street, Suite 530, Woodland Hills, California 91367 | (818) 227-9300 | www.deltawrx.com