PolarMoment
Payment Industry Consultants

Managing a successful payment system implementation project

10 top tips

Payment systems are business-critical. They enable organisations to process card payments and allow customers to pay for goods and services electronically. The successful implementation and operation of such systems is, therefore, essential to retailers, payment processors, banks and ATM providers.

Despite the importance of payment systems, many organisations fail to adequately manage system implementation projects. As a result, many projects fail or fall behind schedule. So, what makes the difference between a successful implementation project and one that fails?

Polar Moment polled a range of payment industry experts. We identified ten key areas where payment projects are likely to fail. The following best practice rules provide guidance to help your organisation avoid these common mistakes. They are not meant to be a comprehensive set of dos and don'ts; good project leadership and management, strong budgetary controls and effective risk management are still key priorities that should not be ignored.

1. The team

Make sure your implementation team has access to all the appropriate experts within your organisation. These include business, technical and operational staff. We tend to find that, in many cases, the business team steps back once the project starts and the operational staff are involved too late. By including the operational teams in the process design and testing phases and referencing the project back to the business needs, the implementation will transition smoothly from design, through build and implementation, and to live operation.

2. Product expertise

To be successful, the team needs access to experts experienced in implementing the chosen payment software products. This gives you independence from your software vendor, allowing you to take responsibility for your project. You gain the expert's experience from other implementations; they know what works and what doesn't. They will help your project keep momentum as they resolve problems without needing to revert back to the vendor.

3. Hardware estate

Plan your hardware estate right at the start of the project. Many projects struggle when the original plans were not comprehensive enough and asking for extra budget at a later stage is not popular. Get advice from your product vendor or from independent experts. Consider medium and long-term business plans and incorporate your internal technical standards. Remember to design for performance, scalability, security and resilience.

4. Processes and procedures

Don't underestimate the importance of processes and procedures. Remember that, in the payment world, PCI is procedure-driven. Lock down your test and live systems and keep them in sync. Follow your own change management procedures during the implementation project. While we are talking about PCI, engage a Qualified Security Assessor (QSA) from the start and use the same resource for consultancy and accreditation.

5. Testing

Testers who understand the products you are implementing will really speed up your project. They are able to solve problems there and then using their prior knowledge and experience. When they do encounter a problem with your payment system, they are able to describe it concisely to the product vendor, enabling the vendor's technical teams to diagnose and fix the fault immediately. Remember to review each fault back to its root cause to avoid future issues. Another good plan is to get either your product vendor or an independent expert to review your test plan before you start.

6. Bank accreditation

Firstly, remember that bank accreditation is not a substitute for proper testing. Bank accreditation is to ensure 'global interoperability' - so that a card from anywhere in the world can be accepted at your point of sale. Book your certification slot early and make sure you have access to the appropriate test tools and cards. Install your communication lines in good time and check bank connectivity well in advance. Once you start, have EMV experts on hand, especially to review the MasterCard ETEC results. Finally, allow time for acquirers to complete their testing; different acquirers work to different timelines.

7. Pilot

Payment systems are business-critical. For this reason, we strongly recommend that you pilot any significant implementation. Use a pilot to prove systems, production operations and business operations. Do not focus on achieving a business goal during the pilot.

8. Rollout

Gradually raise transaction volume. As you do this, have experts on hand who understand the implications of the system messages. Use them to monitor all automated processes for weak points or failings and resolve quickly any production issues. Withdraw these experts as the production operation team's system knowledge grows.

9. Monitor the system

We have seen many customers underestimate the need and value of systems monitoring. As a result, they have struggled once the system has gone live. We recommend that you monitor your systems proactively and reactively. Use your software vendor or independent experts to review your system on an annual basis.

10. System upgrades

Involve others in your system upgrade discussions. This might include your software vendor or other experts experienced in the vendor's products. Hold workshops, share your business goals and explore your technical options. Make sure that the key people outside of your organisations fully understand your aspirations.