

Working Where Others Spend their Holidays

International Projects: Technical Knowledge Is Not Enough

Exciting Endeavor – International SAP roll outs are always challenging. Next to the respective technical knowledge to be provided to the client and the local particularities of the countries where SAP is to be implemented, it is especially the cultural differences between the persons involved in the project that influence the rhythm and result of the project. This already holds true for projects within Europe or when doing business in North America but is even more important when dealing with clients from more remote cultures. Pikon Belgium, a company of the Pikon International Consulting Group, has been supporting the consumer goods concern Henkel with its SAP roll outs in Europe and the Middle East. Pikon's Senior Consultants Koen Meuwis and Steve Willekens share an account of their experiences and their little secrets of success.

When hearing the name Henkel, brands such as Persil, Schwarzkopf, Pritt or Loctite spring to mind. These are just a few examples. Henkel products are an essential part of our daily lives and their variety is about as large as the number of worldwide Henkel locations. Working in all these companies is determined by the rules and guidelines of the Henkel concern. One way of harmonizing the way this huge company is operating is to use the same enterprise resource plan-



ning (ERP) system, which is why Henkel is using a standardized template of SAP and rolling it out to its affiliate companies in the world.

This particular project includes production and administrative locations of Henkel Middle East Africa (MEA) in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Algeria. From mid-May to July 2008, the different SAP modules and their corresponding template



processes such as SD, FI, CO, PtP (Purchase to Pay), OTC (Order to Cash) and MP (Manufacturing Products) were introduced in different phases. Out of these, Egypt was the first country where SAP had been implemented and the system went live on Jan. 1, 2007. In Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, go-live was on Jan. 1, 2008. This will be followed by the roll-out in Algeria and many other Middle Eastern countries will



follow. In these projects, Pikon provides partial project management for FI, CO in Tunisia as well as project support in Saudi Arabia.

The Experiences

Next to the universal requirements to the business processes that are displayed in the Global Business Blueprint, it is especially the local particularities which determine the final design of the SAP systems. In some Middle Eastern countries, country-specific laws forbid companies to procure finished goods and selling of raw materials. This means that the implementation can not be realized without special adjustments. Attempting to prepare the necessary coordination by e-mail or telephone is rarely a satisfactory endeavor. According to Koen Meuwis, however, there are other ways: "After time-consuming and inconclusive attempts to reach an agreement via e-mail or telephone, we arranged a personal meeting. Within no more than three hours, all decisions concerning company code design could be made amicably. Especially in Arab societies, personal contact and direct interaction between the parties involved is indispensable." It should be noted, though, that established decisions are likely to be discussed and challenged repeatedly. This can be seen as an expression of culturally based differences in mentalities which are to be respected and to be considered carefully in advance. Conversation and consensus are of major importance while a quick technical settlement is usually not of major importance.

When familiarizing users with the new systems and processes in training session, one will notice that the local participants are rather listening politely and only begin to deepen their knowledge at a later stage. As Europeans, we are rather accustomed to seeing these training sessions as the central location for knowledge transfer and as a foundation for later successful usage. In Arab societies such an event is rather the beginning of a process during which the necessary knowledge will be transported through personal contact. Knowing this will save a European consultant a substantial amount of frustration and will facilitate an early adjustment of the training process to the target group's preferences. There is some variation between the countries, though, as for instance in Tunisia the European influence is more palpable.

Cross Cultural Cooperation

Also the weekends in Tunisia differ from those in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Alge-

ria: Surprising at first sight, it will soon crystallize that in Islamic cultures Friday assumes the role of the Christian Sunday. While in Tunisia the weekend still stretches from Friday to Sunday, it is Friday and Saturday that are free in Egypt. In Algeria and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, the weekend consists of Thursday and Friday. Without special arrangements, the number of project working days with Europeans and local employees could thus be limited to the days between Monday

and Wednesday. In order to alleviate this restriction, Henkel Saudi Arabia made a special arrangement for projects by setting the weekend to Friday and Saturday. Thereby, each culture will face an equal shift and the working week will remain unabbreviated.

Conversations between the European and local project members take place in a variety of languages. In Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, not all Henkel employees have a good command of the English language. Therefore, the consultants focus on SAP key users with whom they can communicate in English while the local employees in Egypt, for example, speak Arabic among each other. Thereby, detailed technical discussions take much longer and require precise content-related clarifications. This is different in Saudi Arabia, about which Steve Willekens has to say the following: "In the controlling department I have not encountered a single Saudi. There are only Indians working in that department who all speak English. The different dialects within India appear to be so diverse that English has become their working language." Excellent English skills will however not be sufficient in Tunisia and Algeria. Here, Arabic and French are the essential languages. Often this requires the skills of an interpreter. When introducing SAP for Henkel in the Middle Eastern Zone, thorough technical knowledge, social and intercultural competences as well as curiosity are not enough. Knowledge of English and French is an absolute must; Koen summarizes the key requirements to be a successful consultant in this area.

Regarding religious practice, Tunisia is more liberal than Egypt, not to mention

Saudi Arabia. In the latter, the five daily prayers are taken very seriously. Without further notice, faithful Muslims will leave the room in the middle of a meeting in order to pray. While in Egypt work can continue as usual, everything will stand still for a while in Saudi Arabia. Part of the ritual is the ablution, for which there are special shower heads in the bathrooms. Those intermissions should best be used as breaks. In Saudi Arabia, where Islam plays a more prominent role, the prayer

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times have more far-reaching consequences for the European guests than in other countries. Steve Willekens: "While in Tunisia business and social life continue during prayer times, in Saudi Arabia even restaurants will be closed. This is something to be kept in mind beforehand." This will be more noticeable during Ramadan, the month of fasting. By refraining from eating and drinking during daytime, breakfast and dinner are shifted to the nightly hours. Weakened by less sleep and the fasting, working power will be somewhat lower for many employees. "However," Koen Meuwis adds, "in Egypt many people would come back to work after dinner. In the light of the high physical pressure, this is excellent proof of the personal commitment for and the identification with Henkel."

Koen Meuwis concludes: "The people we encounter in the context of our projects are very friendly everywhere. Personal contact is established very quickly and should be nurtured, for example by visiting the city and going for meals together. Such projects can be most enjoyable if one is willing to get in closer contact with the respective country and its inhabitants."

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