



Case Study: Bowling Green State University

University Reveals Details of its Search for the Best Software Technology

Background

Bowling Green State University (BGSU) is located in Bowling Green, Ohio, with more than 21,000 undergraduate students and 3,000 graduate students. It's a school recognized by U.S. News & World Report's America's Best Colleges for its residential learning communities and by The Princeton Review for achieving one of the nation's best MBA programs.

When students are not busy with academics, they flock to the school's recreational sports scene, consisting of four main facilities: The Student Recreation Center (pools, weights, cardio equipment and courts), Perry Field House (turf field, 200 meter track and courts), Forrest Creason Golf Course (18 holes and 6,497 yards), and Ice Arena (main ice, curling and studio ice). The university offers a multitude of diverse programs to keep participants busy in those facilities. Helping to coordinate two of the complexes is Thad Long, associate director for Facilities.

In June 2003, Long and his colleagues began searching for a software provider to help transition BGSU's Department of Recreational Sports from its manual, paper-based processes to sophisticated, automated software to improve operational efficiencies in the Department's four recreational facilities. Through a strategic step-by-step process that took approximately 21 months, 25 staff meetings and 800 e-mails, Long and his team chose Class software from The Active Network. Today, Long is pleased to report that the software is operating on 45 computers throughout the Department. However, the success did not come without time, commitment or effort on the part of the entire recreational staff.

Step One: Form the Committee and Evaluate Internal Needs

The project began when the university's Ice Arena staff scheduled a software demonstration and invited staff from other campus recreational facilities to participate in the meeting. According to Long, this is what initially got the ball rolling. "While the particular software we viewed wouldn't meet all of our Department's needs, we quickly recognized what a software solution would be able to accomplish for us."

Customer at a Glance

Customer: Bowling Green State University

Solution: Activity Registration, Facility Reservation, Intramural Scheduling, Membership Management, POS

URL: www.bgsu.edu

"What astounds me most, however, is that to this day, seemingly every Active team member who answers the phone knows how to answer my question or resolve my issue. Everyone is extremely well-versed in the Class software solution and, after two years, Active's customer service and support is still outstanding."

– Thad Long, Associate Director
for Facilities, Bowling
Green State University

A research committee was formed that consisted of approximately a dozen volunteers throughout the Department, as well as the university's IT staff. The committee immediately conducted an internal needs assessment, evaluating existing practices, software and hardware. The entire Department had some "paper and pencil" procedures in place that simply had to go. They also had some internal software for program registrations, another system for Intramurals, and a third for Sport Clubs, but the software wasn't networked and didn't integrate with any other university software programs.

The committee listed the desired results from the new software, including electronic facility scheduling and program registration, real-time campus ID and credit card swipe, integrated financials and accurate report generation. The Department also wanted a fast, electronic membership verification and courtesy pass log. To prioritize their needs, the research committee ranked additional software functions as "must have" versus "would be nice".

"We were very confident that Class would provide us the best value in the long term," said Long. "We knew there were a lot of satisfied parks and recreation and YMCA organizations out there using Class and, even though Class was newer in the college recreation arena, we knew The Active Network was a company that knows how to develop great software."

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Step Two: Seek Vendor Referrals and Determine Complete Costs

With the team formed and needs assessed and prioritized, the committee's next step was to explore the recreation management software options. From conversations and reference checks with other universities to discussions at conferences and tradeshow, Long was already able to narrow the search down to three of the top vendors. As Long explained, "we only wanted to talk to the 'most comprehensive' players."

After selecting the top three vendors to evaluate, the recreation committee began scheduling on-site vendor visits. Prior to each meeting, Long would send vendors the Department's list of needs and priorities to ensure that those issues were addressed during the demonstration. The committee also prepared questions in advance to ask the vendor and set evaluation criteria in order to effectively compare 'apples to apples'.

The committee realized early on that the entire Department would have to transition from Macs to PCs to use any of the selected software vendors' solutions, which would play a big role in the overall cost and duration of the project. The committee also had to determine whether on-site training would be required, or if Internet training would suffice. If on-site, expenses for airfare, car rental, food and lodging had to be considered in the overall upfront costs. The committee also factored in that desktop software would require individual computer installs, as well as fees for licensing, software upgrades and support requests.

After narrowing down the vendor choices further based on modules, functionality and overall costs, the committee's next step was to evaluate the vendors' backgrounds. They evaluated longevity in the industry, referrals, customization ability and willingness, and customer service reputation.

Step Three: Select the Vendor and Install the Software/Hardware

"The Active Network's sales team really helped put their product in the forefront. The more communication we had with the sales reps, the more knowledgeable we became about the Class software. The time and dedication Active's team demonstrated to us really sold us on the product. We knew they would be with us through the long haul."

BGSU's Tips for Selecting the Best Technology Solution:

1. Visit other campuses to get a real perspective of the pros and cons of each software solution. Ask what problems they've had and how the vendor resolved the issues.
2. Once vendors are narrowed down, make sure all business processes align, such as accounting, IT and legal practices. Long also suggests sending out sample university ID cards early on to ensure they work with vendors' systems.
3. The project manager needs proper authority to keep projects moving forward and prevent delays.
4. Put everything in writing, be flexible and keep your sense of humor.
5. Be as thorough as possible and ask the vendor every question that comes to mind. Then ask, "What have I still missed?"
6. Involve an IT staff member every step of the way, especially someone who 'speaks' both business and computer languages.
7. Create internal and vendor checklists and timelines.
8. Begin using new software during a convenient period, prior to heavy registration periods.
9. No department is ready to move forward with a project until the business office says it is.
10. If you buy a Cadillac, can you afford to maintain it?

In addition to the customer service, Long and his committee were drawn to Class' program registration, the point-of-sale system, the facility reservation module and the overall user-friendliness of the software. The team knew that Class provided out-of-the-box flexibility to adapt to the Department's practices and procedures. What's more, Class offered dozens upon dozens of customizable reports which, according to Long, was very important to the individual needs of BGSU recreational staff.

With a software vendor selected, the committee's next step was to take the software recommendation through the appropriate approvals. One stumbling block Long and his team faced during the approval process was determining whether or not it made sense to have the campus IT team develop the software in-house. To determine if this approach was both time- and cost-efficient, Long reached out to the other university recreational sports departments, both those who purchased software from a third party and those who developed it in-house. "We received great feedback from other schools," said Long. "After presenting both sides, we finally got the approval we needed to purchase the Class software a few months later." The technology initiative was funded by the money allocated each year to the Department for capital improvement projects.

The Active Network's Class software was then brought before the university's IT staff and other university constituents to ensure compatibility with other departments and programs. Another stumbling block the committee faced was devising a way to tie Class business processes into university business processes. "Organizations must ask the question early on, 'do our business practices have to adapt to the software, or does the software adapt to our business practices?' " It was a bit of a setback, but The Active Network came up with a solution."

Implementation

Today, Class software operates on 45 machines in the Department of Recreational Sports. Long admits that the growth has not always been easy, as teams must always manage staff members' resistance to change. To allow staff members time to become comfortable and proficient using the software, the Department strategically launched a 'test' version of the software first. "The absolute toughest challenge for us with the new software implementation was getting people to dedicate the time and effort to really learn the software," explained Long. "Our system administrators created 'homework' and assigned deadlines, which helped our staff stay on track to learn the software quickly. To overcome any resistance to adopt the new technology, we really took the time to explain and demonstrate the benefits of the software. If you can predict what issues and concerns staff members will have in advance, then you can prepare yourself to respond to every concern. Once people realized the time savings and the user-friendliness of the software, they began to see the benefits for themselves."

Results

The Department of Recreational Sports is now running more smoothly and efficiently than ever before. "Class has absolutely done what we hoped it would. We still have some areas that need additional build-out, but we're working closely with Active's team to accomplish these tasks. The project was very close to budget and nothing came to us as a surprise."