INTEGRATED OPERATIONS

Practical measures that move initiatives in the right direction
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As Simple as Possible but No Simpler

The core objective of integrated operations (IO) is improved decision making, including improvement in the speed to decision, as well as ensuring high decision quality. Is the Oil and Gas industry accomplishing this? What can we learn from nearly two decades of IO initiatives? Helen Gilman, IO specialist in Wipro’s Energy, Natural Resources, Utilities, Engineering and Construction Strategic Business Unit offers some insights from the field,

Where is the industry today? Has IO lived up to expectations?

There is no question that IO, or at least elements of IO, is embedded in upstream operations. However, I believe that we have not come as far as we expected, as fast as we expected.

What has inhibited the kind of progress that was anticipated in the pre-IO days?

There are a number of inhibitors. The main ones revolve around some aspect of technology, process and/or people. The technology that supports IO is not the issue – it is the uptake of the technology that presents challenges. I have seen state-of-the-art collaboration centers only used for meetings with Powerpoint slides on giant screens. Another aspect of technology is ease of use; if it is difficult to operate, it won’t be used. Significant technology investments can end up showing meager returns.

The lack of process, or an imbalance in processes, can also create problems. The scope of IO is broad, spanning multiple functions in an organization. All of those functions need to be addressed in process definition. I have seen instances where well-defined processes in one function cause problems in another function.

Generally speaking, though, technology and process are not the major obstacles to achieve the objectives of an IO initiative. The critical success factor lies in the people part of the equation. There are so many ways that people make the difference for better or worse. It is a multifaceted challenge.
Is there an overarching concept or strategy that will help an organization manage the people part of an IO initiative successfully?

Simplicity. There is a quote from Albert Einstein: Make it as simple as possible but no simpler. This does not mean that the process of making it simple will be simple. The simplicity that supports success needs to be in the way that the people interface or interact with the IO elements. It takes some complexity to make things look simple at that level.

What is an example of the simplicity you are talking about?

Back to the technology bit: Make the technology transparent. Nothing stops an IO initiative in its tracks faster than technology that is hard to use, takes special effort to learn, or simply doesn’t work the way it is supposed to. Though it may be tempting to implement all the bells and whistles at once, you may find that the new technology isn’t being used, or is being used as if it was the old technology (like those meetings with giant Powerpoint slides I mentioned earlier). Start off with technology changes that are not too different from the systems currently in use, and only a few at a time. When big changes are in the plan, prepare the way by creating easy-to-use “tip sheets” and offering short, interesting demos that people can attend as many times as they need to in order to gain confidence in using the new technologies.

You talk about change, which is a large part of an IO initiative. What changes in management strategies do you recommend?

Again, make it as simple as possible. IO initiatives do usually involve significant change to people, process and organization as well as technologies. Change management is therefore critical to success, and it’s important to pay attention to it. But it is equally important to keep things simple. Understand how much change people can cope with and structure the initiative accordingly. Plan change management activities alongside development and implementation of the solution—don’t just tack change management on at the end with user training.

At the beginning of an IO initiative there are simple, practical change strategies that can put into play. First, ask questions and observe behaviors. Very simple, yet many organizations don’t do this. Any good manager will be able to get a feel for how change is being handled just by talking to staff and watching how they are working.

A more formal way to take the pulse of your people in the beginning is to create a “baseline behavior” survey that shows how people are currently doing tasks that will change as part of the IO initiative. Use the same survey at key points in the timeline to measure change (positive or negative) in these behaviors. This will allow you to gauge whether or not the initiative is on target in relation to the people who are impacted.
Pay attention to naysayers. While it can be tempting to ignore or minimize these people, use the opposition as a management tool. People don’t resist changes in their work routines for no reason. There might be fear that critical deadlines won’t be met or that needed tools and resources will no longer be available, or hard to find. Feeling that there is already too much to do in the day, and incorporating new technology/process will cause something to fall through the cracks. Or simply being tired of having to learn yet another new thing to do the job. Find out why naysayers are saying nay and think about whether or not their objections can be addressed. For example, slowing down the roll out of a new technology might work to give these people the time they need to adjust without losing productivity.

Finally, use simple learning tools to capture, store, and share insights and solutions among users. Knowledge management doesn’t require a huge investment. It can be easy to provide ways for people to get in the habit of recording and sharing what they learn about new systems and processes. A five-minute after-action review that gets written down, stored, and made accessible to others can help people adapt to the new ways of working.

Do you have any other recommendations for setting up an IO initiative to succeed?

There are many but these are the ones come to mind immediately. First, step out of a generational mindset. The people involved in an IO initiative span several generations, and each generation has different expectations. Accommodate these differences when designing the initiative.

Second, go slow. Don’t take on too much at once. I often recommend designing an initiative, then cutting objectives in half. This puts expectations in a more realistic context.

Third, clearly understand the problem you are trying to solve with IO before you start. This may sound elementary, but a surprising number of organizations initiate programs without having a clear idea of what they are after, and therefore don’t know if they are succeeding or if the right return on investment is being realized.
The core objective of integrated operations (IO) is improved decision making, including improvement in use of data, processes, tools and people. IO is a way of working that brings together all aspects of the business including functions like finance, operations, health and safety, and logistics. An integrated approach to operations usually involves introducing new technologies that are easy to use and accessible to all employees. However, this is not always the case. IO initiatives can be hindered by lack of support and commitment from employees, resistance to change, and inadequate planning and implementation. To overcome these challenges, organizations should start by making the technology transparent and easy to use. They should also provide training and support to employees, and involve them in the decision-making process. By doing so, organizations can increase uptake of the technology and ensure a smoother transition to new ways of working.

About the Author

Helen Gilman is an Integrated Operations (IO) subject matter expert within Wipro’s ENU Consulting Practice. She has been helping Oil and Gas clients with the strategy and delivery of transformational IO projects. Helen has extensive experience in the design and has set up programs and projects, looking at how IO could address key issues and opportunities within specific assets. She has participated in IO assessments at over 60 assets across the world.
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