



SAP the Green way...

A perspectiv-e from PMLifeline

Ecotricity Manage Major System Upgrade With IBM and SAP

When you first arrive in the Gloucestershire town of Stroud and enter the head quarters of Ecotricity you do not immediately draw a comparison with competitors such as EDF, NPower or Scottish Power.

Ecotricity is **not your normal utility company** – from its conception and roots in a field in Glastonbury to the horn used to herald your arrival in place of the usual electric powered door bell – you get the feeling that the company works to a **different agenda** and holds deeper and truer values.

The Beginning

Ecotricity was born out of the desire of its founder (**Dale Vince**) to provide energy from sustainable and renewable sources. Energy generated from wind has been the driving force behind the company from the moment Dale set up a wind-powered phone service (called 'windphones') in the early days of The Glastonbury Music Festival. Since then Ecotricity has grown into a thriving business that generates electricity for over 35000 consumers, provides over 12% of the UK's land generated wind power and powers the businesses of well known names such as The Body Shop, Ellis Brigham and Ben & Jerry's.



This is **not a fad** – this is a sustainable, profitable and ethical business that has aspirations to change the way energy is delivered to the masses. With a target of **1 million consumers** in the next 10 years it is only going to get there through well thought out strategy and with proper business processes underpinning the obvious passion that runs throughout the company.

SOME FACTS ABOUT ECOTRICITY:

- *Ecotricity was the first green electricity company in the world*
- *It is now the biggest independent supplier in the UK, with 35,000 domestic customers and over 2000 businesses*
 - *It doesn't just supply electricity, it builds: -*
- *It owns and maintains 14 wind turbine parks in the UK*
- *It produces more than 12% of England's on-shore wind energy*



Meeting Trevor Saunders only serves to enforce that passion and professionalism – a charming, highly approachable yet clearly focused Programme Director with a long history of association with Dale Vince (they met whilst working in a **seaside hot dog bar around 30 years ago** and kept in touch over the years — not least because Trevor married Dale's sister, Sharon!) he brings rigour, process, experience and above all project delivery competence to the business.

SAP

Hired specifically to oversee and manage the **transition to SAP** from an ageing and failing legacy billing system that was no longer being supported, Saunders faced a task of great complexity bounded by the tightest of deadlines. Only eight months to scope, plan, implement, test and launch a new system on live customers whilst also managing the diverse cultures between the outsource partner (IBM) and the rapidly growing and changing dynamics within his own business. **A mighty task**. – but having delivered SAP solutions into HMRC he was deemed the right man for the job.

ecotricity

The Ecotricity model is a simple one—the more turbines that can be built the more **'green energy'** can be generated and delivered to the customer. The problem that faced Saunders (beyond the timescales and cultural differences) was one of urgency – due to the failing system, some customers were not receiving bills at all, and every day there were more and more customers joining – something had to be put in place to resolve the immediate problem but also to ensure an infrastructure was selected that could support the inevitable growth of the company and its customer base – after considering the options, SAP was chosen to be the solution and Saunders was brought in to head it up, with IBM as the implementation partner – as risk free a route as you could seemingly get!

Structure

With 140 staff and a small IT function, Ecotricity doesn't have an **established PMO** or a raft of project planners, coordinators and managers available to be assigned to whatever project comes along. It is a lean organisation in many respects – including the way in which it staffs and governs its projects.

To ensure full visibility and appropriate communication of **risks and issues** Saunders brought in an external IBM PMO consultant, responsible for structuring documentation and communication up and down the channels.

Change was inevitable along the way and there were certainly some casualties and compromises to be made in terms of how the two organisations (IBM and Ecotricity) interacted and how internal staff rose to the challenge of a high demand, high energy project with significant business risk. Most made it – a few didn't.

There was much to be 'won'. No other utility company had implemented SAP IS-u successfully in the UK before – **Ecotricity was to be the first** - and this project was a test bed for both the technical solution and IBM as the partner of choice for other energy and utility companies.

IBM needed to adapt and work with a smaller more **agile** company than they were used to – but it was important for them to make it work.

With such a critical project to his name Saunders had to ensure the right management approach was in place and that a **'no blame'** culture prevailed. Talking to Saunders it seems his natural style is collaborative and supportive. He encourages people to work outside of their comfort zone but provides an environment where they can flourish and contribute without fear of reprisal - an essential competence in the best programme and project managers regardless of project or sector.

Methodology?

In our discussion it was clear that no overriding methodology was used by which the project was 'strictly' run or governed. Elements of an Agile approach were adopted to review prototypes against requirements (10 fundamental functionalities) and regular 'show and tell' sessions were attended by **key stakeholders** to ensure adherence to the end goal. Also essential documentation around Risk and Quality was put in place as deemed necessary and to put the essential discipline in place to run the project.

Constant daily communication took place across the project between IBM and internal Ecotricity project personnel to ensure visibility and project progress and critically the authority to make decisions was freely delegated to subject matter subjects (all under the watchful eye of Saunders). This speeded up the decision-making process by placing them firmly in the hands of those who were qualified (by knowledge if not title) to make them.

Success Criteria

With the project launched on time (7 months from kick off) and the key initial business benefit of 'no change to the customer experience – i.e. **BAU'** being delivered, the project can certainly be regarded as a great success. Reduced complaints, fewer calls into the helpdesk and **better business processes** across the organisation all pay testament to a successful outcome.

In hindsight a greater amount of User Acceptance Testing could have benefited the project as could greater time spent on training staff on the new system. This could have reduced the time spent learning in a live environment, but with timescales as tight as they were something had to give – and compromising quality was not an option.

ecotricity

Saunders ponders the element of the project that he is most proud of and settles firmly on the way young staff were brought into the project and asked to step up beyond the mark. The resulting delivery through **strong mentoring** and support, combined with tight Ecotricity/IBM teamwork gives him the greatest buzz.

Add to this Ecotricity being short-listed for the SAP European project quality award in Berlin in 2008 and you get a clear recognition of the manner in which the project was run and managed.

So despite having been through a very major system upgrade and cultural shift, both driven by increasing customer numbers, and a vision to service over 1million customers in the next phase of its growth, Ecotricity clings stubbornly onto its **uniqueness and eccentricity** – and with a founder who chooses his Programme Director on the strength of his hot dog cooking and family connections – they are certainly unique!

The FUTURE

What next for this ground breaking organisation now the systems are in place to take them to the next level and beyond – a solution for converting dual energy customers (those that buy gas and electricity from one supplier), the development of a viable domestic turbine, web self service to improve the customer experience and simply **more wind turbines**. Plenty to keep Trevor Saunders busy for the foreseeable future.



Article written by Helen Moore: Managing Editor PMLifeline Sept 2008

ecotricity