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Case study

Service
Project Management

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Sterling Pharma Solutions - External SAP Project Manager



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The Company

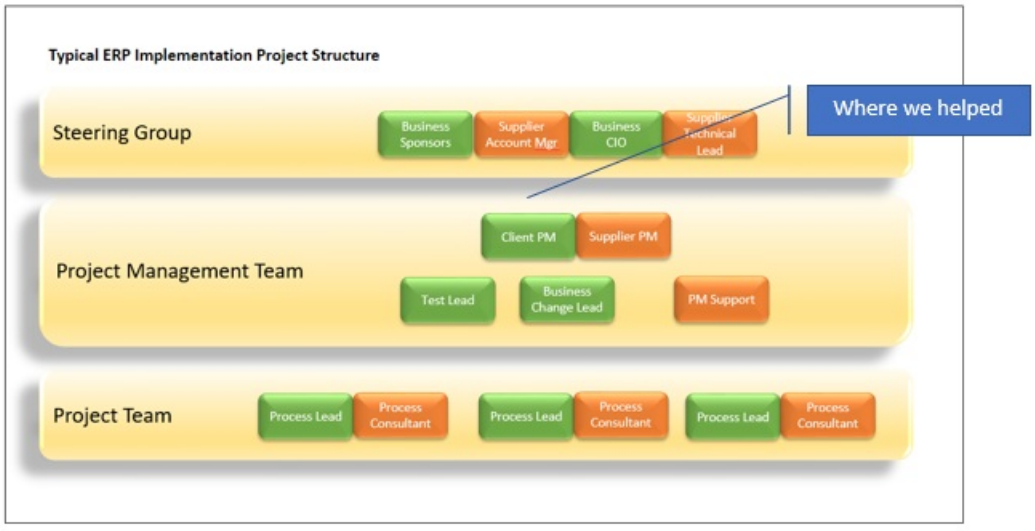
In March 2019 GHO Capital, the European specialist investor in healthcare, acquired a majority stake in Sterling Pharma Solutions. Sterling Pharma Solutions, based in Newcastle, specialise in complex and difficult to manufacture Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs). As part of this investment, Sterling embarked on an extensive programme of improvements across the organisation. Key to this was a stable and scalable technology infrastructure, therefore, Waterstons were approached to work with Sterling to address one of these challenges.

The Challenge

Having implemented SAP R3 in 1999 as their main business system, Sterling had an ERP solution that had served them well for many years. However, the system was old and outdated so the time had come for an upgrade. Sterling selected Itelligence along with their IT.LifeSciences SAP solution, and a move to a hosted S4 HANA platform. A project was required to reimplement SAP using SAP/Itelligence best practice to provide a validated, scalable core system for the current business and to support future growth and corporate acquisitions.

Business systems should follow the same best practice model when it comes to setting up a team:

- Free up your best and most knowledgeable **team members** to work on the project. Your people need to understand the business objectives of the project, be respected by their peers and be empowered to make decisions. This will likely mean you need to backfill them with temps, or perhaps promote more junior members of staff to cover. A project is not somewhere to hide a poor performer.
- If you are using **external consultants**, they should buddy up with a business counterpart. This approach ensures that the system is designed and tested to meet the business requirements, as well as providing a great learning opportunity for the business leads to pick the brains of an expert. Often identifying process improvements in the process on the way.
- Ensure you have a strong **steering group** that can influence the business, knows what it wants, cares about the project team and can make solutions and resourcing decisions quickly when needed.
- Have a **project manager** who can lead and support an inexperienced team, understands the delivery approach, and can communicate the issues and risks to the Steering group.
- Put them all in the same **room.**



Often on projects, we have to work with the hand we are dealt with. The perfect candidate for any role is rarely available in-house at exactly the time you need them. Sterling followed all of the best practice recommendations and committed its best team to the project, however they didn't have a suitable candidate for the project management role. This is no surprise; systems implementations don't tend to come along every year, meaning that this is the role you are most likely to need some external help with.

Waterstons weren't the obvious first choice for Sterling. After all, we're not SAP specialists (but we do host SAP for a few customers), we didn't have vast experience of the pharmaceutical industry (but we do know high risk, regulated and FMCG and manufacturing) and we'd never worked with Sterling before.

So what were the key ingredients to our joint success?

Delivering through our Values

Our Project Management team isn't huge, but we have a range of skills and experiences and all follow good project management practices; managing risks, tracking the plan, leading the team - we'll save you from the full list. Andrea Glenton had the credentials, with over 20 years of ERP and IT project experience; however it would take more than track record, experience and methodologies to deliver the outcomes needed. It would take living our culture and delivering our values. Armed with these, our project managers can step up to any challenge.

We asked Andrea to talk us through our values and how they translated to outcomes on the project:

- **Honesty**: *"We tell the truth no matter how hard that is to hear. When I joined the project it was already a few weeks behind schedule, however, the go-live date was linked to the annual shut-down and couldn't move. The date could still be hit but there were risks and compromises that we talked through with the Steering group."*
- **People first:** *"Two months into the project, COVID-19 struck. A team that was already under great pressure to deliver now had to do it all from home. At this point, my experience in working with people was essential. Taking time to chat to individuals about their challenges, helping them to prioritise work, getting more resources on-boarded and helping the team by picking up some additional actions, helped the team stay positive throughout."*
- **Trust**: *"The team knew their stuff and then I had to trust them to do the right thing by the business and the project, especially when the "same room" rule was broken by home working. I also had to earn the team's trust. The start-up of the project had been a bit bumpy, so closing out some niggling issues and laying out a clear plan of action, were my first priorities when I joined the team."*
- **Empowerment**: *"Sterling senior management empowered their team members to make some big decisions, but their doors were always open for impromptu questions and guidance as well as the more formal decision making when it was needed. As an external PM, it's our job to challenge and guide improved decisions based on facts."*
- **Collaboration**: *"This was very much a joint team with Sterling, Itelligence and Waterstons working together towards a single goal. I worked closely with Itelligence's project manager, meaning we gave clear and consistent messages and we were able to break down any organisational boundaries getting in the way of the project.*
- **Innovation**: *"With the move to home working happening within days of the government announcement, the IT team at Sterling used the technology available to quickly roll out group messaging and scale-up secure home working. We implemented SAP solution manager for test and defect tracking and FreshService for cutover issues, to give central visibility of remote activities."*
- **Quality**: *"Deploying a validated system in a highly regulated industry meant that quality could not be compromised. Risks had to be understood and assessed. Sterling assigned a specialist in pharmaceutical validation to oversee testing and worked closely with the validation experts at Itelligence in The Netherlands. We followed a clear validation plan that was built into all of the project deliverables."*

The conclusion

When you kick off a large project, you may prefer to have someone from inside your own organisation manage it, and if they have the right skills and experience, then it's a great option.

However, using an external project manager isn't necessarily a compromise or second-best option. Here is why Waterstons can be a good choice: -

- We have experience of a wide range of industries and can share good practice and knowledge from outside of your organisation and sector
- We're systems agnostic. This means we have a wealth of experience across vendors and solutions
- We bring experience of managing remote and international teams, and can cut through internal challenges for example around projects being 'done to you, by HQ'. The post COVID world will still involve remote working.
- There is an organisation behind our PMs. If something happens, they are not alone.
- Our experienced project managers will always stay true to our values. If you feel they mirror those of your organisation, then we'll be able to work really well together.

If you need a PM that you can trust to get the job done, we'd love to talk to you about your next exciting challenge.