

Cook County overcomes 'tremendous amount of skepticism' to complete \$75 million ERP upgrade

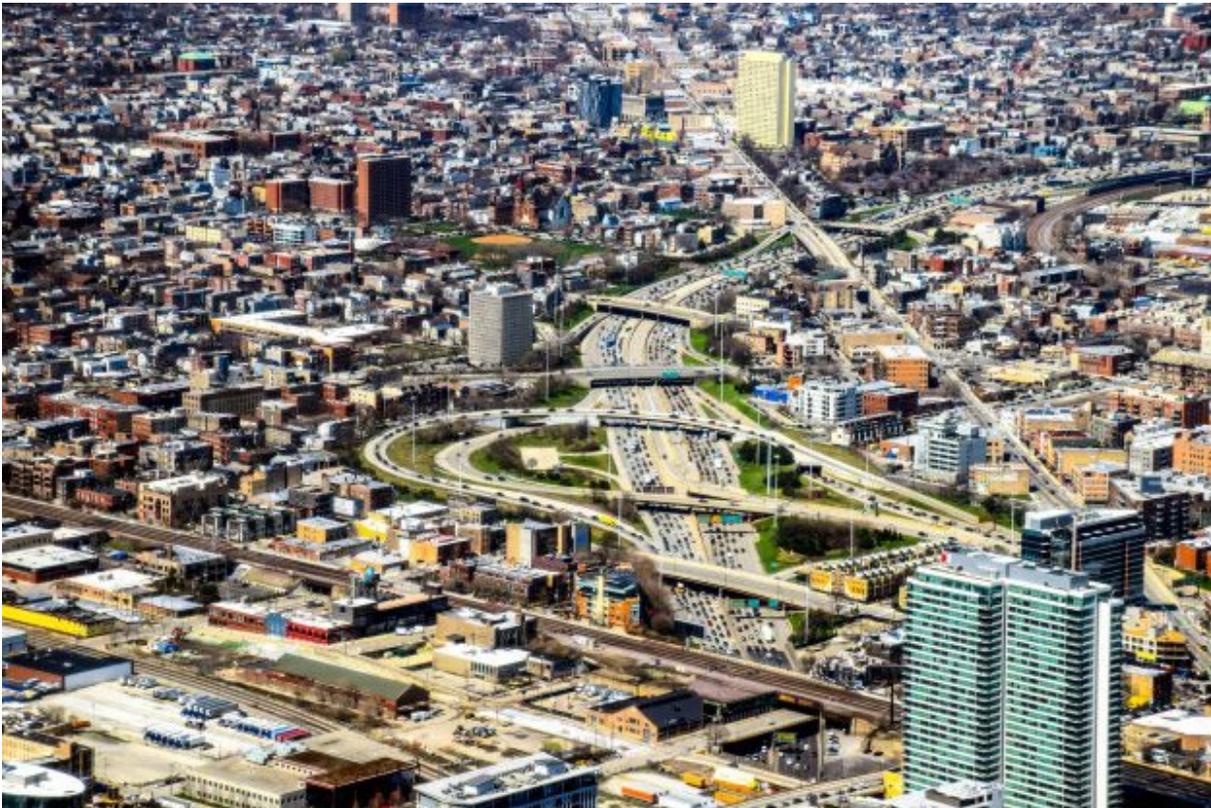
Officials of the Chicago-area municipality tick off the benefits of combining eight outdated systems into a single modern solution for all 22,000 county employees.



By *Colin Wood*

OCTOBER 4, 2018 1:28 PM

[BIO](#)



(Getty Images)

Cook County, Illinois, recently capped an \$75 million IT project that was nearly 10 years in the making and addressed operations that had languished for decades.

Officials told StateScoop that they put the final touches Monday on an IBM/Oracle upgrade of the county's ERP, or enterprise resource planning system, the back-office hub that ties all of an organization's services together. Leading up that day, Cook County's main challenge had been to overcome decades of IT neglect. A unique political structure and tradition of scrimping on technology purchases left the county with eight separate ERP systems that hadn't been patched or updated since being installed more than 20 years ago.

IBM implemented the "[mammoth undertaking](#)" in seven phases: finance and procurement; budget and financial reporting; human resources, payroll and benefits; inventory and contract management; single sign-on access; mobile supply chain; and personnel review for the county's hospital system.

Tom Lynch, the county's chief information officer, said he considers the upgrade project an unmitigated success, but that completing it included a learning curve and a few uncomfortable moments.

"The county did not have a tradition of enterprisewide projects," Lynch said. "That was a new concept to many of the elected offices. So, to a large extent we had to convince them that moving to this shared model would be better for them."

Cook County has 10 elected offices that enjoy high levels of autonomy and operate their own information technology departments. Even though Toni Preckwinkle, the county board president, supported the project, that alone wasn't enough to get every office in the county to cooperate.

There wasn't strong support from across the county, Lynch said, so his strategy was to start with a single office where he could show the value the project could deliver. At the same time the ERP upgrade was underway, the county was also launching its first enterprisewide IT project — a new time-and-attendance system.

"When we first started that project there was a tremendous amount of skepticism that it would fly and die — that you may get it under the office of the president but you wouldn't get everyone else to use it," Lynch said.

Eventually, other offices saw the value of both projects, and today, all of the county's 22,000 employees sit on a common ERP. Jill Ruzevick, director of enterprise resource planning, said that since Aug. 15, 12,000 people have logged on, which she considers a sign of success.

"As we enter the support phase, we see that people's trust and patience has grown," Ruzevick said.

Multiple delays

The county demurred from an ERP upgrade in 2009, and again in 2011. Lynch attributed the delays to the county's procurement process and a general feeling that they weren't ready yet. In 2012, the county finally issued a request for proposals after gathering information on ERP solutions, selecting Oracle's E-Business Suite the following year.

Also in 2013, the county hired Lynch as its director of enterprise resource planning — the position now held by Ruzevick — to lead the project. His office began searching for an implementation vendor and eventually settled on IBM, which would take on implementation, hosting and maintenance services under a single contract.

When the project finally got underway in 2014, it included not just a technical implementation of the new software, but an analysis and mapping of the county's processes. Lynch found that while county staff knew how they did their jobs, their protocols and processes were mostly undocumented.

The county had, for example, a catalog of more than 100 collective bargaining agreements with about 350 union locals. Lynch said integrating the logic and process of those agreements into a technology framework was highly complex, but once the first offices starting using the system, "we bought credibility," Lynch said. "Folks started to believe that we could in fact do what we were saying and have a solution that met their respective needs."

Lynch and IBM were then able to start implementing more sensitive functions, like human resources. He said that it was a challenge to get county employees to understand

-In this Story-

States, Illinois, Tech News, IT Infrastructure, Modernization, ERP, Cook County

Stay alert to all the latest state and local IT news.

dailyscoop
Produced by statescoop

SIGN UP TODAY
