Organizations are increasingly turning to Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software to help create more efficient and integrated business units. In turn, this has generated a demand for university students with in-depth knowledge about business processes and how they are implemented in these ERP systems. However, the complexity of these systems creates challenges in providing enriched learning experiences. This research reports on the results of a pilot test of Business ByDesign, SAP’s new “cloud-based” ERP solution. Ideally, the more intuitive, user-friendly interface should lead to improved understanding and learning by students and increased opportunities for business faculty to determine how this system may be integrated across the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Large and small companies around the globe are using Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems to manage organizational data and to create operational efficiencies. The sophistication of these systems creates countless opportunities for those who have the skills to implement and manage these systems. This is one reason companies like SAP have partnered with universities to provide early exposure to the logic and business processes that are associated with enterprise systems. To date most of the education has revolved around on-premise enterprise resource planning systems. Recently, SAP introduced a “hosted” ERP solution called Business ByDesign. This is one of the first Software-as-a-service (SaaS), or “cloud-based,” ERP solutions that is globally viable.

During Fall 2011 and Spring 2012, a select number of universities were invited to participate in a pilot test of the effectiveness of using Business ByDesign to teach enterprise systems. There are a number of interesting issues associated with bringing the SAP cloud to the classroom. This research reports on the results of this pilot test with the goal of helping business faculty determine how they may use such a system.

BACKGROUND

With over 100,000 customers and 12 million users worldwide, SAP is the largest ERP software provider in the world. The widespread implementation of ERP systems such as SAP has increased the demand for decision makers knowledgeable of ERP systems and their underlying integrated processes [3]. Seethamraju [8] believes that business graduates today must understand the concepts of cross-functional business processes that are embedded in enterprise systems. The SAP system integrates modules that touch on all business disciplines. As such, it is a tool that can be integrated into business curriculum to provide students a hands-on, engaging learning experience that is truly relevant to their careers and in high demand from top-tier companies. Started in 1988, the international SAP University Alliance
program has evolved to provide support for teaching and research in enterprise systems. With over 1,000 member schools, students around the world have had a chance to use SAP ECC (ERP Central Component), their on-premise enterprise solution. *(Note: SAP ECC is the current evolution/name of their SAP R/3 product.)*

Over the years, researchers have looked to study the educational impact of allowing students to learn about enterprise systems through hands-on exposure to ERP systems. A common approach to incorporating SAP into business curriculum has been to train students on how to perform SAP transactions across various application modules. Seethamraju [7] reports that while this does achieve some learning outcomes in terms of SAP skills and understanding of enterprise systems concepts, deep understanding and appreciation of a business process perspective remains a major challenge.

Rienzo and Han [6] suggest that hands-on step-by-step assignments will not produce a comprehensive understanding of process, but it will prompt an appreciation for new levels of complexity. This is supported by Seethamraju [7] where he found that some students have rated these experiences as a common data entry exercise and have failed to experience deep learning opportunities. Chen, et al [2] recommend that because of the complexity of ERP systems, it is very important that instructors provide proper guidance and correct any misconceptions in preexisting knowledge so students can realize the intended purpose of the ERP learning. In addition, Seethamraju [8] suggests that the complexity of the ERP system itself makes it hard for students to understand the links between information, business processes, and managerial decisions.

One possible solution to this complexity is the introduction of a new enterprise system. Business ByDesign is a Software as a Service (SaaS), cloud-based enterprise solution designed for small and medium sized enterprises (SME). Business ByDesign is a rapidly maturing solution with 500 customers to date and a target of 1,000 by year’s end [4]. The delivery model eliminates the need for a large IT infrastructure. With 35 end-to-end business processes, Business ByDesign is an integrated enterprise suite that includes support for financials, human resources, sales, procurement, customer service and supply chain, as illustrated in Figure 1. With a more intuitive, user-friendly interface than SAP ECC, users experience easy access to functions, interactive graphics, built-in learning and help features. Ideally this should lead to increased productivity for employees and improved understanding and learning for students.

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*Figure 1 - Business ByDesign Processes*
In order to determine the effectiveness of using Business ByDesign to teach enterprise systems, during Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 a select number of universities were offered the opportunity to participate in a pilot test of Business ByDesign. This pilot included analyzing the appropriateness of several Business ByDesign curriculum modules designed to introduce enterprise systems concepts. The conference presentation will report on the results of this pilot test at one university. In addition to providing an overview of the Business ByDesign system and suggested curriculum, we will discuss the effectiveness, challenges and opportunities we observed. These preliminary results and observations will be useful in helping faculty in Colleges of Business determine how this system may be integrated across the curriculum. Ultimately this will help in revising curriculum to best meet the needs of our students.

REFERENCES


