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CU Shared Practices [1]

PORTAL ZONE CREATION

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DESCRIPTION:

The project team, comprised of two employees from the Arts and Sciences Budget Office and one from the Arts and Sciences IT department, collaborated to create 5 “portal zones” in the Arts and Sciences portal. These portal zones are applications that improve how the Budget Office manages and processes the College’s financial commitments or agreements. An individual zone was created for each of the following types of agreements: Faculty Retentions, Faculty Start-ups, Recruitment, Equipment Matching and Library.

Background: The Arts and Sciences “portal” is a framework tool that interfaces with the financial and human resource systems of the university. This portal is a powerful tool that was created by the College’s Budget Office and IT department over the last decade. With a focus on continuous process improvement, the college endeavors to create new applications that leverage technology and optimize our operations. The portal is continually evolving in response to our ever-changing work environment. The project described in this submission is an add-on application that was developed for the Arts and Sciences portal.

Historically the College maintained “agreements” for start-up packages, retentions, recruitment allowances, library packages and equipment matching’s in hardcopy format in various decentralized locations (i.e. in binders and filing cabinets in different offices). This made these documents difficult to search, not readily accessible by all and susceptible to version control issues. It was necessary to reference these documents when making the necessary cash or budget transfers. These agreements were not stored electronically and they were not linked to budget or cash transfers. There was no centralized electronic archive to allow these agreements to be readily accessed by the entire budget team.

Because these agreements impacted different individuals within the Budget Office there were several employees managing redundant hardcopies of these agreements. Agreements were stored physically in different locations. This decentralized filing made the organization susceptible to version control issues: Who had the most recent version of the agreement or had institutional knowledge regarding an important component of the agreement?

The previous manually-intensive process relied on individuals each maintaining hardcopy files for their area of responsibility. There was no efficient mechanism for the Budget Office staff to share visibility regarding the status of all commitments. Employee turnover was painful as the loss of institutional knowledge made it especially cumbersome and time intensive to research the various agreements and/or transfers.

In an effort to create visibility for the entire Budget Office team, streamline operations,

enhance research capabilities and improve the documentation trail for budget and cash transfers, the project team created 5 portal zones to manage financial commitments and transfers for the College.

Each zone uses a dashboard to efficiently and very effectively illustrate which commitments are completed, upcoming or overdue. Each commitment that is loaded into the portal links the electronic agreement with the budget of cash transfer in the financial system so that supporting documentation is readily accessible to, thereby creating an efficient electronic trail for the transfer.

HOW DOES THIS IMPACT THE UNIVERSITY?

The team designed the tool to have several different functionalities to address the process issues mentioned above. These functionalities of this portal application impacted Budget Office operations as follows:
Functionality:
A. Streamlines how the Budget Office uploads commitments and performs budget and cash transfers. Multi-year commitments are loaded once with future transfers queued up.
Impact:
• Improves efficiency
• Improves transparency

B. Converts paper-based processes (for start-up, retentions, library, equipment matching and recruitment) into electronic processes. All Budget Office staff can quickly access from their computers.
Impact:
• Improves efficiency
• Improves visibility for Budget Office staff
• Utilizes technology
• Minimizes paper usage

C. Saves supporting documentation electronically for enhanced search and research capabilities. Creates centralized access of all relevant communications/notes or versions of key documents.
Impact:
• Enhances research capabilities
• Improves efficiency
• Eliminates version control discrepancies
• Minimizes the footprint required to store physical documentation
• Streamlines and improved the College’s documentation/record retention
• Minimizes the risk of damage to document s (backed-up on server)

D. Links supporting documentation to transactions (i.e. budgetary commitment agreement linked to start-up and library budget journal entry record, recruiting authorization form linked to recruiting budget journal entry record, retention offer letter linked to retentions budget journal transfer, cost share agreement is linked to equipment matching budget journal transfer)
Impact:
• Increases efficiency (easy to find/reference supporting documentation). Complete electronic trail to follow.
• Enhances research capabilities

• Improves visibility for Budget Office staff
• Improves organization and succession planning for the unit (agreements are linked to transfers, centrally saved)
• Mitigates the risk of the loss of institutional knowledge by creating a tool that provides snapshot transparency regarding the status of the College's financial commitments.

E. Provides a dashboard for Budget Office staff to quickly assess the status of financial obligations
Impact:
• Improves financial reporting
• Improves transparency

The creation of these zones transformed how the Budget Office operates. As mentioned above, previously these 5 different types of financial commitments were managed, stored, and referenced in physical files. Redundant filing systems were necessary. Budget and cash transfers were not electronically linked to supporting documentation. Research was time-consuming and obtaining a snapshot of the status different agreements was cumbersome. The project team combined finance/accounting knowledge with software development expertise to create a new portal application that impacts the Budget Office operations in the following ways:
• Streamlines how the college manages and processes financial agreements
• Decreases the cycle time from document approval to transfer thereby accelerating budget and cash transfers to departments
• Improves the Budget Office's ability to research agreements or transfers
• Allows full visibility for all individuals in the budget office (with access controls)
• Eliminates the redundant filing systems and duplicative efforts of maintaining these files
• Reduces the Budget Office's vulnerability to the loss of institutional knowledge (from employee turnover)

IMPLEMENTATION STATUS:

The 5 portal zones went live and were fully operational in the fall of 2012.

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