Bill's Building Blocks

Legacy Systems Behaving Badly

The two universities where I work run on multiple legacy information systems. Student class registration and official final course grades are kept on one such system. Class rosters can be pulled from this system as soon as registration begins for a semester. However, there are no alerts that students are added to or dropped from a course. The professor has to sample the roster and manually compare it with the previous roster. Such fluctuation in the number of registered students continues until the final add/drop date a few weeks after the start of classes. From that point forward the class roster is stable, or so I thought!

Blackboard, a second legacy system, is a learning management platform that delivers announcements, the syllabus, lecture notes, assignments, unofficial grades, and more to students. A student must be on the roster in the registration system in order to gain access to Blackboard. In my case it takes two days for the information transfer to be completed. New features have been continuously added to Blackboard. I am using one of those features this semester to provide on-line chapter quizzes to a very large class that get automatically graded. The chapter quiz is scheduled to be visible only during a specific time window; after which it is no longer student accessible. You guessed it. One of my students had a tuition payment issue after the add/drop date, and he was auto-dropped from the registration system. It took time for the student to discover the problem, more time to resolve the problem, and two more days to regain access to Blackboard, thus missing the chapter quiz window.

In the world of supply chains many companies still operate multiple legacy systems that feed information from one to another in a batch mode. Some of these information systems are specialty programs, like import/export documentation processing or tax reporting or serial number tracking, all peripheral to ERP. Some are Excel based or homegrown because companies had been unable to afford a large system price tag.

The successful operation of any information system is a combination of policy, process, and technology. The policy of tuition payment before being on the roster, the process of the registration system feeding the learning management platform at a fixed time, and the technology of no alerts with scheduled test windows created the potential for an unexpected operational defect. This is also quite likely in the world of supply chains.

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