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The Value of **Automation** in Higher Education's Back Office

Cost Savings, Simplifying Administrative Tasks, and Beyond

THE BEST RUN **SAP**

Higher education has been on the leading edge of deploying AI and other "smart" technologies in classrooms and online. And while technology has greatly enhanced faculty and student experiences, it also has the potential to improve and streamline operations for back-office and administrative functions.

As universities grapple with decreasing budgets and even adapt to a "new normal" of remote learning environments, they are looking for opportunities to maximize scarce resources. Turning to tech solutions can allow them to do more with less, without sacrificing the foundation of personalized services.

How Tech is Solving for Now

Automated processes can create a wealth of opportunities for universities, said Brian Kyser, principal solutions consultant with SAP® Concur®, a leading provider of expense, travel and invoice management solutions. "We want to create an experience that is as effortless and frictionless as possible so that faculty and staff can do what they've been hired to do, which is further the mission of the university."

Here are Three Ways Technology Contributes to More Effective Back Offices:

1. Empower Employees to Operate More Efficiently and Productively, Wherever they Are

"AI applications can free employees from routine procedures and allow them to concentrate on tasks that require more nuanced, higher-level human cognitive skills, an area where AI will not make inroads for many years," said Ari Chanen, PhD, Vice President of Artificial Intelligence for Strategic Education, Inc. Strategic Education, Inc. is the parent company of Strayer University.

An ideal example is the much-maligned expense report.

"It feels like we've had a goal for decades to have the expense report write itself," Kyser said.

Now, finally, technological advances are improving the process, through new capabilities that make it easier for employees to capture their expenses and comply with updated school travel policies, which will be increasingly important as they evolve to keep up with shifting realities. It also roots out fraud and inadvertent waste. Through automation the accounts payable department can keep the process moving in a seamless paperless environment, no matter where they are working.

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Phone calls represent another time-intensive function that often can be handled without using precious employee resources. For example, staff don't have to field calls from vendors wondering when they'll be paid. Instead, they can use an automated process to check the status of an invoice themselves via an online portal. In addition, Dr. Chanen explained how Strategic Education helped Strayer University develop a chatbot called Irving that can differentiate among 1,500 topics to address common, frequently asked student questions. The Irving chatbot successfully understands students. As of January 2020, 89% of Strayer students agree that Irving helped them solve their issue easily and 93% of them would recommend Irving to other students.

"Having a responsive chatbot like Irving can help free up the university staff for more nuanced questions, while still providing a high-quality, student-facing service that is available 24/7," he said.

2. Ensure Compliance

Whether it's government grants or the bounds of NCAA regulations, universities spend an inordinate amount of time ensuring compliance with ever-changing regulations. But having a paper process that puts the burden on an auditor to cross-reference every item creates an arduous system. That's where they can benefit from pairing optical character recognition applications with AI and machine learning to extract critical information and electronically process documents, Dr. Chanen explained.

Through this process, the system reads receipt data to identify what's allowable under specific policies — a task that's harder than you might think. For example,

consider alcohol, which is rarely reimbursable by university guidelines. As Kyser pointed out, there's seldom a line item on a receipt that clearly states it's alcohol. Instead, it might list a certain brand of spirits or the name of a drink, creating a laborious process to find any potential outlier.

"AI can leverage 10,000 different types of alcohol so employees avoid unwittingly violating policy," he said. "Instead of requiring somebody to find a needle in the haystack, a system like SAP Concur solutions gives you all the needles, and you decide which ones matter."

3. Improve Cash Flow

It's never been more important to find savings than in today's environment where revenue streams are changing and often decreasing. Investing in automation today can help an organization improve and protect its cash flow to allow for smoother operations.

While many colleges and universities initially automate with the goal of redeploying staff to more service-oriented endeavors, it's not long until institutions begin to see additional value. For example, schools could create a "rule" in the workflow that would prompt faster payment to vendors that offer an early-bird discount, so the school never misses the savings. In another scenario, if departments spend with two office-supply stores, the system can be oriented to remind a user to favor the one with which they have a negotiated agreement. Kyser has found many partners of SAP Concur to initiate a virtual card payment, which prompts a rebate.
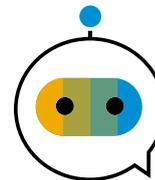
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Brian Kyser, principal solutions consultant with SAP Concur

"We literally have clients who pay for the entire cost of our system solely through that virtual card rebate," he said.

And that's the real value of automation, where the return on investment expands beyond just the immediate return on the cost of the technology itself. That can be found in increased efficiencies, as staff regain hours previously used for tedious tasks that can be spent in more satisfying ways. It can even be a way to attract talent, given the younger workforce and their changing expectations for the world of work.

"Millennials and Gen Z expect the type of experience they have on their device to be mirrored when they go into the workforce. It's up to a university that's trying to attract that newer talent to offer technology that's agile enough to provide that type of usability," Kyser said.

The Next Normal

What's ahead for back-office technology? Kyser said AI leveraged with reporting could be the biggest untapped opportunity for higher education institutions. While accurate reporting is crucial, the real benefit comes from using it to build context. After all, the only way to identify potential savings is to know what you're spending where — and that's not so simple when you consider the sprawling reach of a university and its many departments, faculty and staff members, who are required to individually file multiple invoices with different facets of information.

Kyser envisions a chatbot interface that allows you to find exactly what you need without a deep dive into an unstructured database. For example, you can request the amount of money spent by the department or vendor and ask the system to contextually present different sets of data in graph form. Through AI, you could extrapolate data to build reports such as invoice trends, year-over-year analyses or anomalies in spend. Institutions could then leverage this data in numerous ways, from seeking more attractive terms through vendor consolidation to rooting out fraud and waste.

"My university partners are constantly considering new ways that technology can achieve efficiencies and save money," Kyser said. "And that realigns the perception of automation technology from an expense to an investment. Rather than a cost center, it becomes a revenue center."

Learn more about how SAP Concur solutions can help universities save time and money.

About SAP Concur

SAP® Concur® is the world's leading brand for integrated travel, expense, and invoice management solutions, driven by a relentless pursuit to simplify and automate these everyday processes. The top-rated SAP Concur mobile app guides employees through every trip, charges are effortlessly populated into expense reports, and invoice approvals are automated. By integrating near real-time data and using AI to audit 100% of transactions, businesses can see exactly what they're spending without worrying about blind spots in the budget. SAP Concur solutions eliminate yesterday's tedious tasks, make today's work easier, and help businesses run at their best every day. Learn more at **concur.com** or the SAP Concur **blog**.

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