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Enterprise Integration Research Center to Address Challenges of Manufacturing, Service Industries

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DURHAM, N.H. – Enterprise integration (EI) is a major challenge to both manufacturing and service industries in a global economy. As a result, the University of New Hampshire Whittemore School of Business and Economics has created a new research center, the Enterprise Integration Research Center, which will address enterprise integration issues.

“As businesses expand into new markets and establish supply chains to support global operations, the challenges to integrate the operations from suppliers to customers grow significantly. Further, the ability to integrate data from multiple sources within the global supply chain and analyze data for making effective and timely decisions plays a major role in determining the success or failure of the business. Given the little attention focused toward this topic in academia, creating a research focus in EI will help establish the center as the leader in this niche area,” said A.R. “Venky” Venkatachalam, director of the Enterprise Integration Research Center (EIRC). Venkatachalam is chair of the Decision Sciences Department at UNH and a professor of information systems.

EIRC’s activities will encompass three areas – research, teaching, and outreach. The center’s initial core faculty will represent a multidisciplinary team from a number of academic and research areas.

“Dr. Venkatachalam has assembled a strong interdisciplinary team of faculty who can assure the center’s success. As these faculty secure external funding, the center will become financially self-sufficient and sustainable over the long term. In short, the EIRC will be an example of what it is seeking to improve in the corporate world – efficient and effective means to provide excellent, integrated services to end users,” said Bruce Mallory, UNH provost and executive vice president for academic affairs.

Initial research will focus on developing frameworks for effective integration strategies; developing innovative technology applications to cultivate information sharing in large organizations and businesses; and exploring emerging technologies and their impact on organization competitiveness, including commercialization.
“The expertise provided by the center will be a valuable resource to private and public companies and organizations, as well as enhancing significantly the Whittemore School’s undergraduate and graduate curricula. The professional development opportunities offered by the center will improve operations in the United States and abroad, demonstrating the school’s continued commitment to providing real-world solutions to real-world problems,” said Steve Bolander, dean of the Whittemore School.

The center will benefit graduate and undergraduate business students, who will gain expanded instruction in enterprise integration. Specifically, enterprise integration will be incorporated into graduate business (MBA and management of technology) curricula in the core and specialization courses. Undergraduates will learn more about enterprise integration early in the undergraduate business curriculum as well as in the information systems management option.

According to Venkatachalam, today’s organizations operate in a highly competitive global environment and with the advent of the Internet, organizations have invested heavily in information technology to better serve their customers (through e-commerce solutions, for example). To improve the cost effectiveness of their operations, organizations have established supply chains to link their suppliers, ensuring an uninterrupted supply of components and raw materials at competitive prices.

“The trend in the last decade clearly points toward a strategy that heavily relies on information technology to compete. Most organizations took the ‘silver bullet’ approach to investing in technology, hoping that such investment would lead to competitive advantage. While this approach did improve an organization’s ability to compete in the global economy it led to mixed results and fell short of justifying heavy investment in information technology,” he said.

An important lesson learned by organizations — big and small — from such reliance on information technology, is that in order to reap the full benefits of technology, many other business changes need to be made, including streamlining business processes, training employees, transforming organization culture, and integrating data, information, and knowledge management, Venkatachalam said.

Since 1990, Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) has emerged as a popular approach to moving toward a fully integrated enterprise. The approach replaced several disparate legacy systems into a single vendor and unified database environment. The advantage of such an approach is that data capture and processing takes place without any duplication and results in higher quality information accessible by managers across various functions.

“At the implementation level, reliance on ERP solutions to help achieve competitive advantage often does not lead to results promised at earlier planning stages. Most ERP projects ended up with significant cost and time overruns. Nor do such systems provide the level of integration promised,” he said. According to a Standish Group study (2000), the average cost overrun in ERP projects is 178 percent with an average time overrun of 230 percent, and a 59 percent reduction in planned functionality.

“Given the lessons learned in the past decade by organizations working toward enterprise integration, we can conclude that a different approach to enterprise integration is necessary in order to help organizations address rapidly changing market needs and ultimately survive in the global economy,” Venkatachalam said.