VISIONBank
One Bank's Best Practices for a Successful Core Conversion

"Sometimes, a core conversion is a necessary evil."

That's the knowledge-backed sentiment put forth by Kelli Simonson, senior vice president and chief financial officer at VISIONBank in Fargo, North Dakota. Not long ago, the bank realized the need to find a more strategic core processing partner to improve integration and efficiency, and selected CSI's NuPoint® platform for its ability to support the bank's long-term objectives of delivering enhanced customer support and a more robust omnichannel experience.

VISIONBank's motto of "Getting It Done" guided the bank through not only its decision to find a new core partner, but also its completion of the conversion process. The bank's leadership set a positive, proactive tone and involved all bank employees, preparing them both technically and emotionally, for a successful migration to NuPoint.

✚ CHALLENGE
VISIONBank faced a conversion to a new core platform in order to improve efficiency and integration. The bank knew it needed a "near-perfect execution" in order to prevent customer impact.

💡 SOLUTION
The bank orchestrated a full-scale plan to prepare employees both technically and emotionally for the conversion. It used such tactics as designated points-of-contact, free lattes, Gumby and a marshmallow fight to ensure a smooth conversion.

◀ RESULT
VISIONBank completed its conversion successfully and now has a system that's already providing value to the bank and its staff: fewer logins, better reporting and "one click to the information employees use most."

CHOOSING A NEW CORE WISELY

VISIONBank didn't take the idea of a conversion lightly. According to Simonson, the bank discussed the conversion process meticulously throughout its vendor search. As the bank vetted possible providers, the selection committee, which consisted of employees from departments across the institution, surveyed staff members extensively regarding the features and functionality they wanted most in a new core system.

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VISIONBank knew it needed a platform that streamlined multiple logins and offered tighter integration and workflows. And beyond technology, the bank considered each potential vendor's culture as well—because cultural alignment with its core processor mattered greatly to the bank. At the end of the day, the technology rewards had to outweigh the conversion risks. And for VISIONBank, deciding to convert to NuPoint offered the solution it needed to achieve its strategic objectives.

So the conversion date was set, and the process was underway. And for Simonson and the team leading the project, the conversion came down to two aspects: "preparing technically and preparing emotionally."

PREPARING TECHNICALLY

A bank's core processing platform is the backbone of its entire operations. VISIONBank knew it had to approach the technology aspects of its conversion methodically. And Simonson realized the dichotomy of the entire process, so the bank took a strategic approach to address both aspects: the conversion and the deconversion.

"We viewed the process in two parts: a conversion to a new platform and a deconversion from the existing system," Simonson says. "A consultant helped us through the selection process, so we hired him to lead the deconversion process on our behalf. This allowed us to focus on system training and our new relationship with CSI."

As preparations got underway, the bank assigned each conversion team member to a different critical area. This ensured that each area had dedicated leadership, and the bank took precautions to not overextend the team leads, which kept their focus on ensuring a successful conversion for their respective areas. In addition, with CSI's assistance, VISIONBank also held system trainings, distributed FAQs and completed eLearning sessions.

But they tempered their learning to a certain degree. Simonson notes one helpful piece of advice the bank received from CSI's conversion team: don't complete training too far in advance, or you might forget key tasks by the time the conversion occurs.

Simonson also wanted to ensure a smooth transition for debit card transactions and Internet banking accessibility once the conversion took place. So, the bank took steps to mitigate those concerns as well. The bank had to register with PULSE, so Simonson signed up six weeks ahead of time to ensure transactions were clearing the network before the conversion. Also, to ensure customers had no issues with Internet banking, VISIONBank followed up on its customer letter with personal calls to every Internet banking user, informing them of upcoming changes as well as steps they would take to access the new interface following the conversion.

But VISIONBank realized that the success of the conversion depended on much more than the technology. Simonson says, "Being mentally prepared is the biggest part."

PREPARING EMOTIONALLY

Moving to a new core system affects everything and everyone. VISIONBank's leadership recognized that each employee would be affected by the conversion, so it built a plan to engage employees throughout the process. For starters, Dan Carey, the bank's president, disavowed the word "conversion" due to its negative connotations, opting instead for "enhancement." In fact, Carey took an active lead in ensuring a smooth, successful transition. According to Simonson, he set the tone from the very beginning, striving always to create positive energy around the project: "He knew if the conversion didn't go well, then it would be bad for our customers."

Along those lines, the bank encouraged employees to remain open to learning the new system, and to prepare for the unexpected. Simonson's encouragement to employees: "Just because it's a different bike doesn't mean you can't ride it." It was this level of reinforcement that led to the bank's official conversion theme—be flexible. The theme served as a reminder that employees would face changes as well as the possible need to stay late or work outside their department or comfort zone in order for the conversion to be a success. As a visual reminder, the bank gave employees a small toy Gumby for their desks, and Simonson says many of them still have them today.

The bank's commitment to preparing both the technology and its employees paved the way for the conversion itself.

EXECUTING THE CONVERSION

When conversion week arrived, VISIONBank had laid the foundation to ensure the project's success. The bank put its designated points-of-contact for critical areas in place, making sure they had the bandwidth they needed to manage the transition successfully. Simonson says they also redeployed some staff to areas of familiarity to help with troubleshooting. For example, one employee who'd been a long-time teller but now worked in another department spent the week assisting the tellers with questions and resolving issues. And to assist Internet banking customers, the bank set up a "call center" in one of its training rooms; it staffed the center with employees from across the bank, even the HR director, to field calls and assist customers in accessing the new system.

"You'll have champions, so let them be your point people," Simonson says.

The bank injected fun and levity into the conversion week as well. Not only were there a lot of meals served throughout the week, but each day had its own theme, like "Thanks a Latte," a day on which all employees received a free latte. Simonson says those daily themes were cheeky and designed to help keep everyone's spirits lifted. And beyond that, the bank took the fun to a new level when it staged an all-out marshmallow fight with the CSI conversion team, just to inject some additional excitement into the process.

"For a smooth implementation, you have to involve your staff," Simonson says. "Because you can't know everything and you need their buy-in before, during and after for the project to succeed."

MOVING FORWARD WITH A NEW CORE PLATFORM

With the conversion behind it, VISIONBank has achieved some immediate benefits on the new platform. NuPoint's dashboards and NuView have simplified reporting, and the system's integration has reduced the number of logins while making information more readily available. Simonson says the bank's employees now have "one click to the information they need the most."

The bank's main concern throughout the process was customer impact. As a community bank, VISIONBank competes with big-box banks, so it needed to ensure the conversion itself didn't negatively affect customers and that the new platform itself improved the bank's ability to serve its customers and compete more fully.

"We realized there is no such thing as a flawless process," Simonson says, "so our goal was near-perfect execution. Our approach allowed us to meet that goal, and we are pleased with the outcome—and the new system."

With its new core in place, VISIONBank is now prepared to tackle its strategic plans for better integration and a more robust omnichannel experience.

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