SOURCE
CONSULTING GROUP

Invoice Template Development & Implementation

By: Sylvia Carrere

Financial & Operational Consultant

As any firm who has recently gone through a financial system implementation knows, it is quite an understatement to simply say that there is a lot of work that goes into such a project. With so many overwhelming tasks occurring throughout the implementation process, important, but seemingly less urgent, tasks inevitably get pushed to the back burner. All too often, this occurs with the development and/or testing of invoice templates.

Importance

The successful development and testing of invoice templates is critical when it comes to the revenue generation and collection processes. When these tasks are neglected, or are met with minimal resource allocation, panic customarily sets in soon before or after system go-live because the billing invoices were not fully developed or tested for different types of billing data scenarios. As a result, the firm's revenue generation is impacted negatively. Template implementation is habitually assigned a lower priority for a variety of reasons, and some of the primary culprits include:

- Low staffing or spreading individuals too thin.
- People are busy with other tasks, including their daily job requirements.
- Other implementation items appear too critical to ignore, and overshadow templates.
- Needed resources, as well as the time and effort needed to design, develop, and test templates, are underestimated.

As the reader may notice, the final bullet does well in highlighting an underlining theme that many firms fail to recognize: The template development process is both critical to operations, and regularly undervalued in scope. To avoid falling into this predicament, it is instrumental to begin the process in as far advance as possible. This includes:

- Analyzing current invoice formats.
- Developing lists/spreadsheets of current formats – Determine which formats are currently used, and their components (such as the time and cost format, what aspects are included, etc.).
- Identifying any obsolete formats.
- Discussing with others whether or not there are any invoice formats that are manually produced or edited (the ultimate goal is to have the billing system produce all invoices without the need for additional edits).
- Developing new template specification documentation to accommodate firm needs (professional assistance is useful in this regard).

Designing Templates

Just as an overall system implementation project is a great time to start anew with data organization and presentation, so too is it an ideal time to redesign templates. Not only are firms more open to change during this period, but if a new financial system was needed, then chances are the invoice templates could use a fresh, updated, more professional look. It is also the most logical time to determine if old templates truly met needs, and not in the sense that, "We have always done it that way." While it is intuitive to some to keep the same look, layout, and template analysis procedures as before, for reasons that will be explained below, it is almost always more beneficial to change the templates along with the system. As a short aside:

> *Before going hog-wild with developing templates, first see if the billing software being implemented comes with standard templates (this especially applies to firms with smaller budgets). Take the time to review them in order to see if they meet your firm's needs. Sometimes they happen to be close enough to use or modify accordingly, while other times it is more cost effective to develop brand new templates (this should be judged by the template developer).*

The primary reason to update template designs while implementing a new billing system is to fully develop specifications to meet your firm's needs. Except for the extremely rare occasion, it is more efficient, cost effective, and accurate to have the system produce the desired output rather than allowing the billing and/or secretarial staff to edit the billing invoices after they are processed/produced by the system. If possible, timekeepers/fee earners should be discouraged or disallowed from simply "doing their own thing" and manually producing their own bills. This takes time and nullifies any benefits that could have been acquired from a standard firm layout/procedure.

Secondly, billing invoices can be a powerful marketing tool, as they reflect the firm's overall image. Invoices are not only seen by the recipient's accounts payable clerk. They are also sent to the appropriate contact person, and what they see is a reflection upon your firm. If not previously done, a firm design/format should be standard for invoices and billing statements. A marketing team can be consulted to address these concerns and help improve the overall appearance of these documents. Specifics to consider when generating a firm standard design/format include:

- Deciding on one firm logo to appear on all documents, but, where appropriate, with slight variations (for example, one region might display "LLP" within the firm name, while another might not).
- Assigning standard, with the possible exception for some languages, overall fonts, spacing, and ordering of invoice sections (cover page, time, cost, AR, remittance page, etc.) regardless of the given office or location. This is not to say that within the invoice there cannot be numerous individual section variations and options, but the overall appearance should have continuity across the firm, regardless of where the invoice is produced.
- Listing the local billing office first within the letterhead section. Including the other offices afterward is acceptable, so long as they follow the standardized firm font and spacing guidelines.
- **Regarding local statutory requirements, which are commonly displayed in the footer section, listing them can still be done without impacting the overall firm standard appearance.*

If your firm decides to make changes to template designs, allocate the coordinating responsibility to one person. This single person will be better able to work closely with the template developer. All template additions and changes requested should be filtered through, and approved by, this one person. If additional approval is needed, then this person can obtain approval before submitting the requested work to the developer. The template developer, therefore, should take instructions from this person only. Some of the advantages of this arrangement are as follows:

- It avoids duplicate template additions/change requests.
- It minimizes, and helps detect, possible template coding conflicts before the request is sent to the template developer.
- The priorities of additions/change requests are more consistently set.
- It allows the template developer to focus on coding, and not coordinating requests coming from multiple sources.

Finally, it is beneficial to create and maintain a catalog of invoice template options that is then distributed to relevant staff (such as secretaries and attorneys). Draft samples can pretty easily be created in Microsoft Word. This format is not only useful when reviewing the look and layout of the templates before time is spent on actually developing them, but it helps the template developer visualize the desired results as well.

Testing Templates

Once templates have been successfully designed, it follows that they will need to be tested. The way to begin this is by developing testing scripts. Ideally, testing scripts will:

- Keep track of items in need of testing.
- Indicate items that have passed testing.
- Indicate items that have failed testing.

Templates should be retested using testing scripts after each test data conversion. Unfortunately, though, even with testing scripts, it is difficult to document every permutation of testing the template, since templates are written in individual sections. In addition to testing scripts, an issues tracking log with detailed information about issues found during testing, and notes regarding applied changes, is vital.

If your firm cannot dedicate the majority of a staff person's time to testing, then it is better to utilize professional assistance than neglect the project, or allocate insufficient resources to it, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, it will provide more time for the staff members whom would have been responsible for testing to complete normal firm business. Due to time constraints, staff testers usually only test for specified layouts, and do not typically venture into unforeseen data combination scenarios.

A major benefit of hiring a professional tester is that they can routinely detect errors (such as mathematical errors, missing data, display of the wrong layout, etc.), and use their experience and intuition to identify inaccuracies that are not normally discovered by an untrained eye. Another advantage regularly arises during the invoice template implementation process. As users become more familiar with the software, it is common for them to add and/or change previously requested items. A professional tester can better determine the additional testing or oversight needed when this occurs, and not just with new items added or changes, but with the overall impact within the template as well. However, despite all of the value a professional tester can add to a firm's implementation, the ultimate responsibility is still on the firm's staff, as they will inevitably need to test and participate since they know what is required and expected by the firm.

Sylvia's Background:

Sylvia has over 25 years of financial system consulting and template development experience on Thomson Reuters Elite's 3E and Enterprise systems. Not only does she have vast knowledge regarding key elements to ensure a successful template development implementation, but she is also an industry expert in template design, development, and testing. She is familiar with template specification and user-guide documentation development as well.