

Unlock value  
through your  
Chart of Accounts

August 2012

Unlocking the value inherent in your Chart of Accounts (COA) is not just an exercise for technical accountants to labour over. Many leading finance functions will attest, the COA can drive real business benefits.

# Introduction

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## A poorly designed COA can hamper your organisation's ability to drive value through performance insights

Many organisations start their COA redesign journey with a very narrow focus and a lack of awareness of the broader downstream implications. For those considering, or already on the COA redesign journey, this paper outlines eight key steps organisations can take to create a COA that delivers real value to the business.

The eight key steps are:

- 1. Understand how the COA delivers performance insights**
- 2. Get more out of your COA**
- 3. Listen to the business – not every answer can be found in the COA**
- 4. Leverage technology – but put the business first**
- 5. Keep regulators happy...and your finance team engaged**
- 6. Incorporate the needs of your global businesses**
- 7. Consider the governance model**
- 8. Involve the business in designing the COA**

In this paper, we highlight the experiences of three large, multinational clients that undertook a major general ledger replacement, including two that redesigned their global COA. Structuring the COA to measure the performance objectives of the organisation is a priority that should be high on the CFO's agenda.



# Common COA-related challenges

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## Common COA-related issues faced by organisations, and which often drive extensive manual work and ‘Band-Aid’ solutions:

- Business units within the company have different COAs and different reporting priorities
- Reports don’t produce the information the organisation needs to properly run the business or meet tax and/or regulatory needs
- General ledger accounts aren’t used consistently across the organisation, reducing the effectiveness of reporting and consolidation
- The COA has not kept up to date with changes in business models and the statutory and regulatory environment
- There is a lack of flexibility to integrate mergers and acquisitions
- It is not clear who owns the COA or has responsibility for maintaining it
- The COA has limited scalability to support changing business models and organisational restructures
- COA processes and policies are poorly defined
- There is limited use of sub-ledger systems for low-level analysis
- There is no link between key performance indicators and the COA
- There is a lack of training on the COA and poor management of COA changes.

If these challenges sound familiar, it may be time for your organisation to re-evaluate its COA. To ensure you maximise the return on investment in any major systems upgrade or new implementation, keep in mind the eight steps to a well-designed COA we have outlined in the following pages.



# Our client case studies

In this paper, we refer to the experiences of three organisations that redesigned their COA. The following is a brief overview of each organisation.

## **Client 1**

This global bank provides retail, corporate and investment banking services at more than 2,000 offices worldwide. Services include personal savings and checking accounts, brokerage and trust services. The company also offers asset management (including mutual funds) and investment banking services such as underwriting and mergers and acquisitions advice. The bank has been expanding its Asian, Caribbean and Latin American businesses.

## **Client 2**

This banking and financial services provider is based in Australia, but operates globally. It employs more than 50,000 people. The bank offers accounts, credit cards, home and personal loans and insurance services.

## **Client 3**

This global technology company designs and develops visualisation solutions for a variety of professional markets, including medical imaging, media and entertainment, infrastructure and utilities, traffic and transportation, defense and security, education and training and corporate AV. It has its own facilities for sales and marketing, customer support, R&D and manufacturing in Europe, North America and Asia Pacific.

# Eights steps to a well-designed Chart of Accounts

## 1. Understand how the COA delivers performance insights

### Our point of view

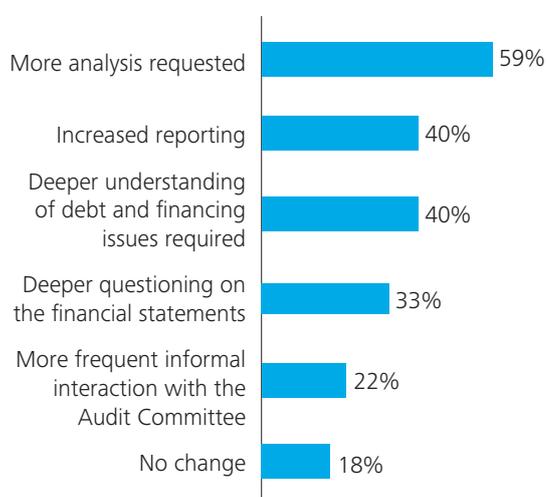
In a COA redesign, the CFO is often not the first person the project team thinks to consult. However, a COA redesign can create many issues for the CFO. Problems with data integrity and information consistency can be driven by various issues, but are often attributable to deficiencies in the COA. The Finance organisation often has to extensively manipulate data to drive insights into the organisation's performance and deliver decision support to the business.

Additionally, answering questions from external auditors and regulatory bodies continues to be a top priority. According to the Deloitte CFO Survey for Q4 2011, over half of CFOs reported an increase in the level of analysis requested from their boards as a result of economic uncertainty (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

*How have the general levels of economic uncertainty impacted the demands of your board and its committees on the CFO and finance function?*

Source: Deloitte CFO Survey, Q4 2011



With 40% of CFOs also indicating that reporting demands have increased, the need to understand the organisation's financial health and performance is a top priority. To enable this, the COA needs to be recognised as the hub through which data is pulled, posted and calculated by any number of groups across the organisation.

A well-designed COA supports all of the organisation's information, reporting and accounting needs, and is built on a foundation of consistent definitions for business attributes and data elements. The CFO needs to be at the front and centre of COA redesign initiatives.

### Client story

For two of our clients, involving the CFO in global COA redesigns was a critical success factor. The CFOs took the opportunity to shape the information that the new COA would deliver, in tandem with a reporting strategy. Their role was critical on two fronts: signing off on the standard use and definition of each financial dimension in the COA structure; and aligning the business accountability model with the future design. In both of these case studies, the CFO sponsored the COA redesign effort and demanded high accountability from the CFOs of each business unit, including the sign-off of the final design for their respective business units. In each case, the CFO was pivotal in aligning inconsistent views, challenging accountability and embedding their strategic view of the business into the COA design.

### Key takeaways

- Ensure the CFO sponsors the redesign and is visibly active in key design decisions
- Have the CFO and business unit and/or country CFOs iron out the key definitions and use of the COA structure
- Embed the CFO's strategic view and desired accountability model for the organisation into the new COA design
- Have the CFO sign off on the final COA design.

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## 2. Get more out of your COA

### Our point of view

COA redesign efforts are often seen as a way to clean up and rationalise the existing chart. They are also sometimes misconstrued as a mapping exercise that attempts to create a 'single' COA by linking many source systems to a group ledger. While rationalising and deleting duplicate and unused values supports the development of a future state COA, it does not expose all the pain points in the chart.

An example is when a single COA code block – such as cost centre values, which are used to define organisation structures and accountability – is also used to capture customer segments and product groups to support reporting. Typically, this is an indication that the COA is not meeting business needs or that information gaps exist impacting decision making.

In addition to setting key design principles for the future state chart, organisations should review the chart's current state to understand the information needs of the business. Although reducing the depth of the chart is a primary goal, the addition of more segments, driven by information requirements, can transform an organisation's ability to analyse its data through a multi-dimensional lens.

In complex organisations, stakeholders continuously seek more information to understand the 'story' behind the numbers. Redesigns should be viewed as an opportunity to revisit the organisation's information needs. A continuous review cycle through a strong governance structure can help maintain the health of the COA. Deloitte recommends that the COA is reviewed every three to five years to ensure it remains relevant to the business.

### Client story

Client #1 initially viewed the rationalisation of hundreds of values in its account structure as equivalent to creating a new COA. While this was true in a technical sense, the organisation could have missed a significant opportunity to refresh the COA to meet its changed information requirements. Although streamlining and rationalising values in the account structure would have enhanced the clarity, ease of use and simplicity of the COA, this approach did not consider that the business had recently moved to a segment and region matrix structure. The COA held disparate definitions of segments, where products and customer definitions were comingled in a single chart block. Furthermore, it ignored the growing demands of local regulatory and statutory bodies. The COA had lost its relevance and was heavily amended to support the burgeoning needs of the organisation's global footprint. Streamlining duplicate and unused values would have provided additional clarity, but this benefit would have been short-lived as new values mushroomed to meet other information gaps.

### Key takeaways

- Start with a study of your current COA but don't stop there
- Interview your information stakeholders (corporate tax, financial planning and analysis, treasury, business unit managers) to understand their pain points. Start by asking 'who needs what information and how?'
- Uncover areas in the chart where a single segment is used for multiple purposes. This will reveal information requirements that are not being met in the chart, and ensure adherence to a leading practice of using single purpose code blocks, where each code block has a single use and a clear definition
- Review new values requested in the past six months to identify emerging business requirements.

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## 3. Listen to the business – not every answer can be found in the COA

### Our point of view

A multi-dimensional COA that provides greater performance and analytical insights needs to be balanced with not overburdening the general ledger (GL). A 'thick' GL can extend the close process, with a greater number of segments to post transactions to, or more reconciliation of variances during period end. On the other hand, pulling information from outside the ledger can make it inaccurate, inefficient and hard to manage; cause system performance challenges; and result in high maintenance costs. Sub-ledgers should be used to track detailed transactional information, which can facilitate in-depth analysis and reconciliation.

Typically, these key questions need to be asked when redesigning the COA:

1. What is the purpose of the GL? Should it be used only for statutory financial reporting?
2. How much data will be in the GL?
3. Do we develop a single global COA?
4. What are the legal requirements for the organisation based on its countries of operation?
5. What are the organisation structure complexities that have to be taken into account in the design?

Answering these questions and considering the following points will help you understand how 'thick' or 'thin' the GL needs to be.

**Thick ledger:** The GL is the central repository for financial, management and, in some cases, operational reporting. Data is detailed in the GL, with several dimensions of information incorporated into the COA to facilitate most reporting needs.

**Thin ledger:** The GL holds summary-level financial data required for statutory reporting only. A reporting and business analytics solution (data mart) provides focused management and operational reporting. Data marts rely on sub-ledgers to gather detailed data and additional dimensions of information.

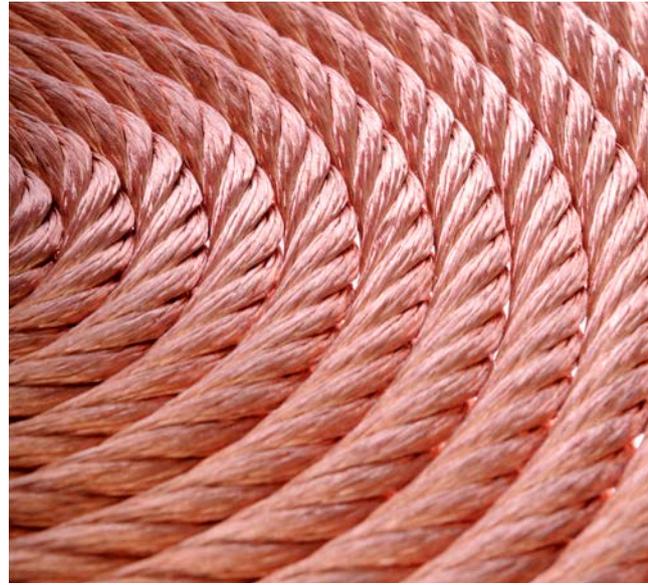
**Management ledger:** This is a ledger that reconciles back to the financial books and records but contains data at a more granular level than the GL. It predominantly supports management reporting and some external reporting.

It is important to remember that the code block structure varies in each organisation, based on drivers such as the scope of information to be addressed the application architecture and the underlying software solution.

Once the design questions have been answered, ensure that you involve the financial reporting and the financial planning and analysis teams to identify the information that needs to be considered in the future state design.

### Client story

The existing COA of a large bank supported its statutory reporting requirements but did not meet all management reporting requirements. The bank asked two questions of its group and business unit CFOs: 'What are we using the GL for; and what reporting will the GL enable?' The CFOs determined that the GL would be the 'book of record' and the bank decided that the ledger would enable statutory, regulatory (where it made sense to do so) and high-level management reporting. With this vision established, the bank took the opportunity to ensure its GL incorporated a recent realignment in its segmentation accountability from product to customer relationship. This was a major consideration in the design of the code block and, in particular, the creation of multi-dimensional values in its COA segment structure, such as lines of business and products.



### Key takeaways

- Establish key design guiding principles by asking:
  - Do we design a thick or a thin general ledger?
  - Should the GL be used only for statutory financial reporting?
- In your interviews, don't just speak to the financial accounting team. Make sure the financial analysis and planning team is included to achieve the best outcomes
- Incorporate a parallel reporting and business analytics strategy and solution into the COA design to provide focused management and operational reporting, and extensively leverage sub-ledgers
- Remember there is no 'right' and use of the code block will vary from institution to institution depending on various drivers
- While it is important to include tax resources in the COA design, every tax decision cannot be solved by the COA (e.g. transaction tax calculations such as VAT, GST, Sales and Use). GL accounts are not required to drive tax decisions. Other data elements from sales or purchase order documents are used to drive tax decisions.



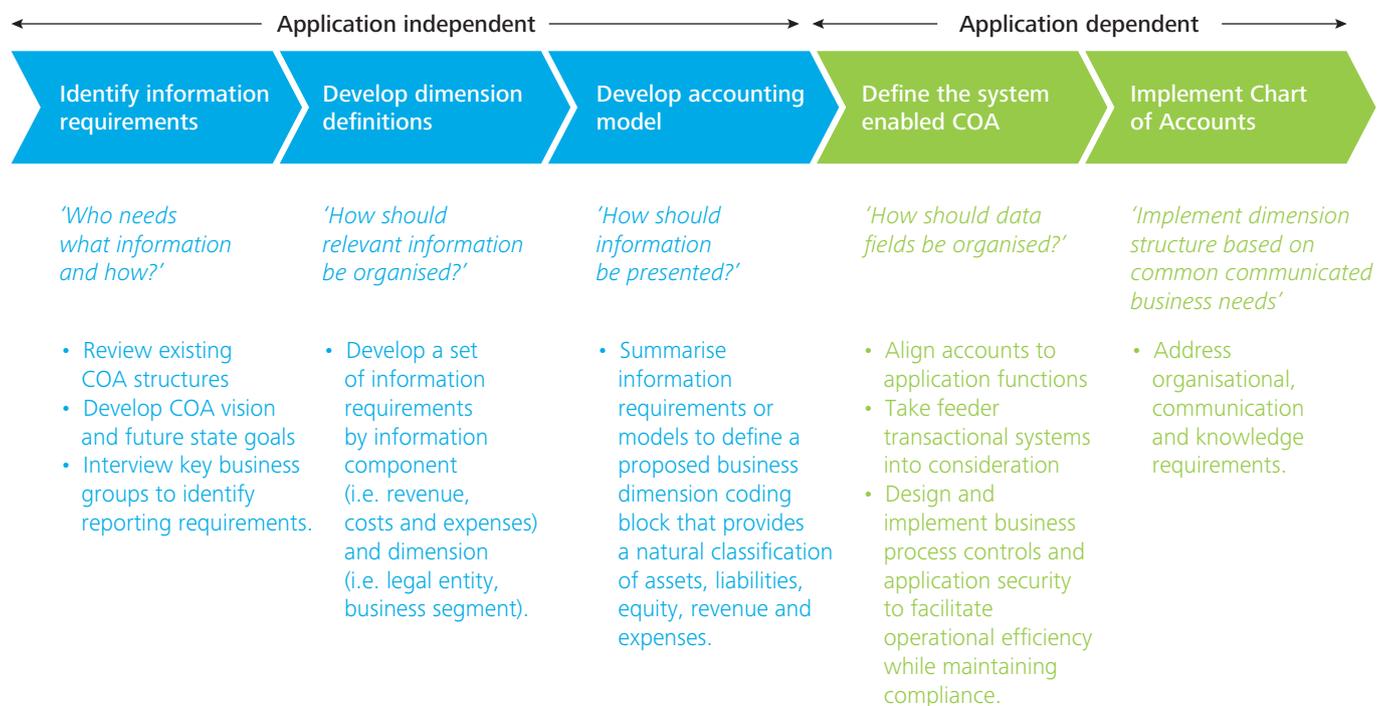
## 4. Leverage technology but put the business first

### Our point of view

A COA redesign is often triggered by an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system upgrade or a new implementation. Best-of-breed vendors offer sophisticated solutions that automate traditionally painful processes, such as balancing intercompany transactions. While there may be an attraction to design the COA in a way that caters for the application, our view is that a system-agnostic approach needs to be adopted. This is illustrated below.

### Client story

In both our global banking case studies, while the vendor and application was known to the project team during the design phase, the banks took a business-driven process to develop the final design. To best capture the data required to support decision making across the organisation, Deloitte has typically used information and accounting models. Information models identify the organisation's dimension (slice and dice) needs and accounting models identify which dimensions are needed by each component of the financial statements and key performance indicators.



The models are used to communicate high-level, business-defined requirements and guide the management of that information.

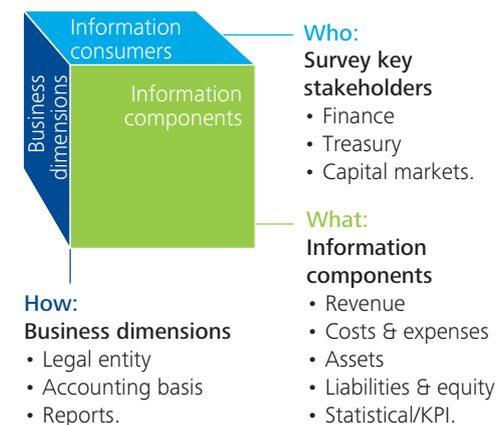
After the information and accounting models are finalised, a rationalisation filter will be applied based on established selection criteria. In our client case studies, once this view was formed, application options were developed to support the desired future state COA.

Often, the application is already known before redesigning the COA; however, identifying the reporting requirements, and establishing standard definitions for them, should happen before determining how the COA will be set up in the system. Best-of-breed applications are configurable to information requirements and a clear understanding of business needs should precede evaluation of options to define and implement the COA in the system. This approach will ensure that the initial phases of design are driven by business reporting requirements, establishment of standard definitions for those requirements and modelling how the information will be presented. The following example demonstrates this type of business approach:

### Key takeaways

- Focus on gathering information requirements first
- Use information and accounting models to understand the information requirements
- Establish criteria to rationalise information requirements for a future state COA
- Consider the application only after the information requirements have been finalised.

### Information model (What/how/who)



### Accounting model example (COA by dimensions) (B/S, P/L, KPI's)

Accounts	Business unit Legal entity	Operating unit Responsibility centre				Product Product	Chart field 1 Location customer	Chart field 2 Customer segment
		Processing		Department				
		Branch	Shared services	Cost centre	Revenue centre			
Profit and loss statement								
<i>Interest Income</i>								
Loans	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Securities	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Securities purchased under resale agreement	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Deposits with financial institutions	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
<i>Interest expense</i>								
Deposits	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Subordinated debentures	x	x	x		x	x		
Capital instrument liabilities	x	x	x		x	x		
Other	x	x	x		x	x		x
Provision for credit losses	x	x		x		x		x
<b>Net interest income</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

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## 5. Keep regulators happy... and your finance talent engaged

### Our point of view

While this lesson will not resonate for all organisations, for our banking clients, regulatory reporting is a major task. Finance staff members spend significant amounts of time extracting data from legacy systems and reconciling it with externally published reports. With increased regulatory pressure and an ongoing need to respond to regulatory changes and requests for information, the GL can ease the reconciliation workload and the need to manipulate data. To reduce the potential risk of reputation loss or financial costs associated with inadequate regulatory reporting, finance teams require consistent data sets that serve multiple purposes.

Although it is not possible for the COA to enable all the reporting roll-ups and dimensions required by regulatory bodies, the COA contains opportunities to store commonly requested regulatory dimensions.

Typically, regulatory reports need to be reconciled back to externally published figures. Often, regulatory reporting is subject to significant follow up questioning from the regulators and organisations need to show how the specific roll-up of information ties back to what has been reported to the market. While some regulatory reporting cannot be completely sourced from the GL, much of it is driven by reporting from an income and balance sheet perspective.

Exploring opportunities such as leveraging existing COA segments to house regulatory values can help strengthen financial integrity and eliminate the need to gather and manually manipulate data. The client story below shows how global banks are focusing on updating their COAs based on regulatory changes.

### Client story

At Client 1 (a global bank) the COA incorporated counterparties in its customer segment code block. Counterparties are other national banks, monetary authorities or governments that act as the ultimate guarantee for loans and indemnities. Managing counterparty risk has been a key focus since the global financial crisis. The ability to report against this dimension sheds insight into the bank's risk and supports more accurate filings to regulatory bodies.

At Client 3 (a global bank) the use of a location code block segment provided insights into residency and non-residency splits in the organisation's balance sheet. This was a key requirement demanded by the national regulatory bodies to which it reports.

### Key takeaways

- Don't ignore regulatory requirements when considering information requirements
- Focus on regulatory dimensions that are prevalent across the group's local environment, as well as local regulatory reporting requirements.



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## 6. Incorporate the needs of your global businesses

### Our point of view

With a vision of a common global COA, addressing local Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) and reporting requirements in various countries is daunting, especially in environments where regulations are immature and changing. One of the hallmarks of a localised COA is the proliferation of natural accounts and cost centres to track dimensions such as residency status and counterparties.

Another is the amount of detail in accounts to meet demands for more information by local statutory and regulatory bodies.

In designing a global COA, the organisation must interview and gather local requirements before determining what can or cannot be enabled in the GL. In best-of-breed applications such as SAP, Oracle and PeopleSoft, there are functions to meet global and local requirements.

Creating second ledgers for individual countries to meet local GAAP reporting requirements and using sub-accounts within group legal entities are good options to consider. Sub-accounts or local accounts reserved for local GAAP entries are options for allowing the organisation to meet country-specific needs without 'thickening' the group COA.

### Client story

At Client 2, a six-month study of newly created values suggested that the expanding global footprint and the inability of group accounts to meet local reporting needs were becoming issues. In the redesign process, the bank used local accounts where GAAP differences were minimal and a secondary ledger where GAAP differences were significant. Furthermore, the inclusion of other optional code blocks such as residency and the use of a customer segment to track counterparties supported the more stringent statutory reporting requirements of emerging countries.

### Key takeaways

- Gather local reporting requirements
- Understand the 'art of the possible' after requirements have been gathered
- Validate the group set of values with local offices to gauge the gaps that may arise after the initial COA design has been set.

## 7. Consider the governance model

### Our point of view

It's important to keep in mind that the COA is a 'living chart' and will continue to evolve with business growth and external changes. In our experience, a new COA often suffers from poor governance and a lack of clear policies and procedures to maintain its status as a 'living chart'. This causes common issues such as multiple uses for single code blocks, proliferation of duplicate values and inconsistent use of those values. To ensure the new COA maintains its design principles and integrity, it's critical that the project team also designs a governance model, as well as a robust communication and change management plan.

To maintain the benefits, integrity and relevance of a new COA, we recommend a periodic review of the COA and embedding COA maintenance frameworks into standard business processes. A COA should be supported by a comprehensive governance structure, drawing upon the principles in the COA Governance Model outlined below, that includes documented policies, processes, and accountabilities related to the use and maintenance of the COA.

The typical governance areas includes: establishing key data element standards to ensure integrity of definitions is maintained through the life of the COA; well defined COA maintenance protocols to prevent proliferation of GL accounts and other segments; defining and implementing a standard process to help integrate changes to the COA structure or processes and keep all COA users and systems up-to-date.

During a COA redesign, corporate accounting policies should be updated. This is further exemplified in the client case study below.

### Client story

Client 3 commenced initiatives to document data elements; however, it had limited success implementing these data standards due to a lack of resources and unclear executive sponsorship. A lack of central ownership over COA segments made it challenging to define new segment values and usage in a consistent manner. Consequently, the chart became 'polluted' with values that were already blocked for future use or which could be easily eliminated or captured in other dimensions or sub-systems (e.g. currencies, intercompanies, loans, inventory, staffing costs, VAT and legal accounts, statutory requirements).

COA Governance Model		
Key data element standards	Policy and process standards	Communication and training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a centralised location that is easily accessible by all COA users and which consolidates all new COA policies, segment definitions and documented processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a robust communication plan that keep users informed of the status of COA-related initiatives, changes and updated definitions</li> <li>Select and prioritise process standardisation and improvement opportunities</li> <li>Define follow-up actions for non-compliance with COA policies</li> <li>Assign ownership for enforcing consequences of non-compliance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote COA education across the organisation</li> <li>Review and approve training curriculums</li> <li>Provide oversight to guide training and communication initiatives.</li> </ul>

As new requirements were implemented, the chart became increasingly inflexible, non-transparent and difficult to use. During the redesign phase, the company took the opportunity to develop a centralised Chart of Account Policy, owned by a Governance Committee. The Committee evaluated each change request and assessed the request with Chart of Account best practices and the Chart of Account Policy. This was strictly enforced and changes centrally overseen by the Committee, ensuring the integrity of the redesigned COA was maintained.

#### Key takeaways

- Ensure the COA is not a one-time event, but is reviewed in depth every three to five years, complemented with regular reviews and maintenance
- Governance is as important as the redesign itself and needs to encompass key data element standards, policy and procedures, and communication and training
- The importance and extensiveness of the governance model is influenced by the level of detail in the new COA. The more detail the COA includes, the higher the maintenance cost and risk
- Implement robust training and communication programs to manage the impact of future changes
- Conduct a review of Corporate Accounting Policy manuals to ensure they are consistent with the new COA design.



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## 8. Involve the business in designing the COA

### Our point of view

The main objective of the COA is to track, in an accurate and timely manner, every single business event that has an accounting impact. However, the COA's design is not just the finance team's concern. To make the COA effective and relevant, a key success factor is ensuring that a broad range of stakeholders are involved, both at the corporate and operational levels.

Based on our experience, COA redesign projects often fail due to a lack of understanding of the impact on stakeholder needs. By extending the project team beyond the finance function, different perspectives can be included, both in defining requirements and determining any impacts the change will have on the business.

A natural place to initiate design is in the Controllers group, as the COA must meet statutory and regulatory requirements. However, limiting the input to this group may affect the COA's ability to address the organisation's existing and future information needs, or worse, create future issues due to a limited scope and narrow perspectives. It can be challenging to balance both statutory and management reporting requirements and operational considerations. To mitigate this, we recommend the project team is complemented with a cross-organisational team that best represents information and operational requirements.

It is also important to include tax stakeholders as part of the cross-organisational and functional design team. In a complex global tax environment, the risk of financial reporting errors increases. A lack of standard processes and/or limited access to the required level of accounting detail to meet reporting requirements can add to the risk of misstatements.

Establishing a separate, unique general ledger account is often the most cost-effective way to accumulate segregated information required by tax departments and enables book-tax differences to be automatically calculated. Specific needs for geographic and intercompany reporting, if not addressed by the COA design, should be made readily available from other sources. The need for tax-specific accounts should never be overlooked in an effort to streamline the COA.

### Client story

Client 3's current global COA was defined over the years by the finance department and shaped by its own requirements. As a result, the COA became less relevant for other information stakeholders such as human resources and procurement, who relied on general ledger information to support reporting and decision making. This resulted in 'shadow reporting' across the organisation as the COA lost its relevance. A redesign effort was initiated and the organisation made sure to involve all relevant stakeholders in the project. While this lengthened the design process, the result was a code block that addressed the organisation's requirements more effectively.

### Key takeaways

- Let the finance group lead the initiative, but don't let it be the sole driver
- Strengthen the partnership between finance, tax and IT to leverage financial and IT expertise to the maximum extent
- Apply a broad requirements approach then apply a thorough and robust filtering process based on design principles and leading practices, to design the COA.

# Where to next?

As your organisation considers the need to redesign its COA, reflect on how these best practice principles could be incorporated in your approach. Redesigning a global COA for your organisation is complex but critical if you want better insights into your organisation's performance and desire alignment through a common information foundation.

**If your organisation is considering redesigning its COA, or has already started on the redesign journey, and would like to discuss possible approaches, please contact us for more information.**



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