5 main risks when implementing SAP S/4HANA

How method, experience and tools drive a successful S/4HANA transformation.

Foreword

Since its market launch in 2015, SAP S/4HANA has established itself as the central foundation for the digital transformation of many companies. With its real-time processing, modern user interface and high level of integration capability, it promises not only increased efficiency but also strategic sustainability. However, the reality of the projects paints a different picture: Only a fraction of transformation projects run on time and within budget - and even fewer fulfill the originally defined business benefits.

In our day-to-day work with customers from a wide range of industries and of all sizes, we repeatedly find that the success of an **SAP S/4HANA project** depends less on the technology and more on strategic preparation, a methodical approach and organizational anchoring. The decisive factor is not whether you switch to SAP S/4HANA - but how.

This white paper highlights the five main risks that we believe determine project success or failure: Budget Overrun, Time Delay, Technical Complexity & Data Migration, Change Management and Lack of Value Realization. For each of these risks, we provide a practical insight, supplemented by study results, case studies and concrete solutions from our day-to-day project work at AKQUINET.

We invite you to use these insights as inspiration for shaping your own transformation strategy—with the goal of navigating your SAP S/4HANA journey safely through risk zones and creating real business value.

Key questions

How can budget overruns be avoided?

What causes delays?

How is technical complexity made manageable?

What does effective change management need?

How can sustainable value realization be achieved?

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Starting point

The migration to SAP S/4HANA entails considerable financial, technical and organizational risks. Studies show that S/4HANA transformation projects often exceed budget and timeframes and do not achieve the expected benefits. A recent Horváth study found that 60% of companies reported budget and schedule deviations, with a quarter exceeding the budget by a large margin and 40% significantly over budget [horvath-partners.com]. The German-speaking SAP user group [DSAG] also reported that many projects are classified as "critical" in terms of time, budget and quality dsag.de. Reasons include inadequate planning, a lack of resources and underestimating complexity and change effort. LeanIX points out that the biggest hurdle is not the technology itself, but the lack of coordination between specialist departments, project management and IT [leanix.net]. In addition, excessive customization and a lack of process orientation often prevent full value realization [computerweekly.com].

This white paper analyzes the **five main risks - budget overrun, time delay, technical complexity and data migration, change management/user acceptance and process interruption/lack of value realization** - in detail based on current study results [LeanIX, DSAG, Gartner analyses via Computerwoche, Horváth and others]. Causes and correlations are explained for each risk. Practical solutions based on AKQUINET's service portfolio are then presented, such as a thorough pre-project phase (Phase 0), the use of the SAP Activate method, automated tools such as bRobots®, structured data migration, targeted change enablement, managed services and value chain analyses.

The aim is to secure the implementation of SAP S/4HANA and ensure the long-term success of the project.

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1. Budget overrun (financial risk)

SAP S/4HANA implementation projects harbor a significant financial risk, as many companies systematically underestimate the actual effort and costs. In a study by Horváth, **60%** of the companies surveyed reported significant deviations from the budget and schedule - **25%** exceeded the budget significantly and a further **40%** significantly [horvath-partners.com]. DSAG also points out that budgets that are set too tightly regularly lead to bottlenecks and missed targets [dsag.de].

A key driver of these budget deviations is unrealistic optimism: many project managers underestimate the complexity and duration of an S/4HANA project in the early stages. What appears to be a lean calculation in theory turns out to be a highly complex transformation project in practice. With realistic assumptions, the project plan would often be very different. In addition, the initial requirements are often set too low. As the project progresses, it then becomes apparent that processes, data quality, integrations and customizations are much more complex than originally assumed. This dynamic leads to *scope creep*, i.e. the creeping expansion of the project scope, with correspondingly rising costs.

Another aspect is the widespread practice of **tactical budgeting:** in many cases, projects are deliberately submitted for approval with budgets that are set too low - on the assumption that they will not be stopped once they have started, even if the actual costs increase significantly. In this early phase, there is often a lack of a reliable business case calculation and a clear assessment of potential financial risks.

There is also a systematic cause on the provider side: **profits from supplements.** Many implementation partners know that the highest margins are not in the initial scope of the contract, but in later change requests and extensions. If these supplements are not anticipated or contractually regulated, additional costs are incurred that further undermine budget planning.

Finally, **weaknesses in project management** - for example in decision-making or controlling changes in expenditure - further increase the financial risks. From AKQUINET's point of view, this is evident in many projects: Realistic cost planning in phase 0, transparent governance structures and an early risk assessment of the overall project are crucial in order to avoid budget overruns later on.

> To prevent budget overruns, it is crucial to conduct a detailed analysis of the current state and the future target architecture as early as the pre-project phase (Phase 0). AKQUINET supports this with a comprehensive Phase 0 analysis that thoroughly captures business processes, the existing system landscape, and functional requirements.

> The SAP Activate methodology provides a structured framework for accurate budget and resource planning. Additionally, value chain analyses help identify process areas with the highest value contribution, enabling clear prioritization from the outset.

During implementation, AKQUINET offers automated tools such as bRobots® to accelerate repetitive tasks like test execution or data migration validations—reducing both time and cost. Continuous change control through cost-differentiated reporting and managed service models (e.g., operational support packages post go-live) help keep the project budget on track and flag potential overruns early.

By combining strategic foresight, automation, and financial transparency, these holistic measures help eliminate cost traps early—and ensure your SAP S/4HANA project stays within budget.

2.   Delay (project risk)

Time delays are almost the rule with S/4HANA projects: according to Horváth, transformation projects take **an average of 30% longer** than planned [horvath-partners.com]. Only around 10% of completed conversions remained on schedule. In more than a third of projects, it is not possible to stay within the original schedule. The DSAG survey confirms this situation: only 33% of respondents are on track with the progress of their S/4HANA projects, while 66% report problems staying on schedule [dsag.de]. The reasons for this are similar to budget overruns: **Underestimated complexity, lack of capacity** and **unclear project goals.** Added to this are unforeseen technical challenges (e.g. during data migration) and an insufficient focus on critical paths. According to Horváth, planning and project structure are too often neglected: **unclear process definitions, missing roadmaps** or **missing milestones** lead to decisions being made too late [horvath-partners.com]. This lack of planning leads to rework and rescheduling, which delays the project.

A reliable project schedule starts with thorough preparation. In Phase 0, it's essential to define the implementation strategy, system architecture, and target processes—ideally supported by value chain analyses and enterprise architecture tools.

The SAP Activate methodology, with its agile-based workstreams (Prepare, Explore, Realize, Deploy), breaks down the transformation into manageable phases and enables timely decision-making. This is where AKQUINET acts as a strategic advisor: In collaboration with the client, kick-off workshops are used to develop detailed project plans, define milestones, and align all stakeholders.

To accelerate delivery, AKQUINET provides automated assistants and bRobots®, which enable parallel execution of development activities (e.g., code conversions) and test cycles—significantly reducing lead times. Additionally, managed service offerings

provide on-demand access to expert resources during implementation, helping to prevent resource bottlenecks.

Ongoing progress tracking and risk monitoring—whether through SAP Activate or a dedicated Project Management Office (PMO) service—allow potential delays to be identified early and proactively mitigated. These measures play a critical role in keeping your SAP S/4HANA project on schedule.

3.   Technical complexity and data migration (project risk)

A key risk factor in the **introduction of S/4HANA** is the technical complexity of the existing landscape and the challenge of data migration. Many companies today operate highly integrated systems with numerous interfaces and customer-specific adaptations. According to LeanIX, over **70%** of companies use more than one ERP system, often from multiple vendors [leanix.net]. Enterprise architects warn that this is precisely where the biggest hurdle lies: **80%** of respondents to a survey see the identification of system dependencies as the central problem in migration computerwoche.de. A lack of an overall view leads to interfaces or individual developments being overlooked during the migration. Similarly, outdated custom code components are often not immediately recognizable - their adaptation (code remediation) can be enormously time-consuming and costly. When migrating data, many project managers underestimate the effort involved in extracting, cleansing and loading historical data into the new system. Inconsistencies or data quality problems that require extensive reworking are often only noticed at a late stage.

To minimize technical risks, AKQUINET relies on detailed analysis and a proven migration methodology. As early as the pre-project phase (Phase 0), a target system architecture is defined, documenting all relevant systems and their interactions. Enterprise Architecture Management (EAM) tools—such as those recommended by LeanIX—help visualize dependencies and define a consistent target architecture. In parallel, AKQUINET conducts automated code and interface scans to detect and categorize redundant or outdated custom developments. This early visibility into technical debt provides a solid foundation for planning.During the implementation phase, data migration is structured according to SAP Activate best practices. Data mapping, cleansing, and validation are addressed early on to reduce downstream issues. Specialized migration tools are used to efficiently handle large data volumes, while bRobots® automate repetitive migration and testing tasks—reducing manual errors and saving time.Extensive test cycles run in parallel, with randomized validation of migrated data to ensure accuracy. Taken together, these measures form a robust, technically sound migration approach that enables a smooth and reliable transition to SAP S/4HANA—even in highly complex environments.

4. Change management and user acceptance

Even if the technology works, a lack of user acceptance can jeopardize a project. The human factor is often considered too late in **SAP transformations**: Traditional planning focuses on software and processes, while change management is seen as a downstream task. However, studies show that the biggest barrier to a successful rollout is often coordination between specialist departments, the project team and IT [leanix.net]. Two thirds of respondents in a **LeanIX survey** cited team alignment as the main problem. The **DSAG study** also emphasizes that a transformation project requires "a lot of time, especially with regard to employee change" [dsag.de]. If there is a lack of support from management and inadequate communication, motivation and understanding suffer. Users may feel overwhelmed by new processes or fail to recognize the benefits. Without targeted training and continuous support, many companies initially do not notice any increase in productivity or cause errors that disrupt the process.

Targeted change enablement is a critical success factor in any SAP S/4HANA transformation. AKQUINET recommends identifying key stakeholders and capturing their requirements as early as Phase 0. Based on this foundation, a tailored communication and training strategy is developed—starting with key user enablement. These key users later serve as multipliers, sharing their knowledge with broader teams. SAP Activate includes organizational change management as a core component. AKQUINET enhances this with proven methodologies such as training portals, interactive workshops, and e-learning modules. Involving end users early in process design ensures that the solution is aligned with real-world workflows—promoting acceptance and reducing resistance.A particularly innovative element is the "Key User as a Service" model. Many mid-sized companies face resource constraints when staffing internal key user roles. AKQUINET addresses this by providing experienced professionals who temporarily or permanently act as functional bridges between business and IT. This approach avoids resource bottlenecks, accelerates testing phases, and maintains critical know-how—even in cases of staff turnover or limited internal experience.
After go-live, AKQUINET's managed services provide rapid support during the hypercare phase, quickly resolving operational issues and ensuring stability.Ultimately, the change enablement strategy is designed to foster acceptance and engagement—so that SAP S/4HANA becomes not a foreign system, but a valuable enabler of daily work.

5. Interruption of business processes / lack of value realization (business risk)

SAP implementations are strategic transformation projects. If the focus is too much on technology, there is a risk of a mismatch between cost and benefit. A classic mistake is to map the legacy system 1:1 without fundamentally questioning processes. As a result, inefficient processes remain

in place or new process breaks even occur. A recent guide discussion by Computer Weekly points out that a lack of business benefits ("lack of value realization") is a major reason for failed SAP projects computerweekly.com. Often there is no robust business case in which costs and expected benefits are clearly defined. LeanIX therefore emphasizes that S/4HANA must be seen as a business transformation and not just a technical upgrade leanix.net. DSAG also warns that simply switching off the old systems is not enough - instead, the opportunity must be used to renew processes and create sustainable added value dsag.de. If there is no conscious process optimization, the migration can lead to unwanted interruptions and planned efficiency gains fail to materialize.

AKQUINET offers a holistic approach for the **SAP S/4HANA transformation**.

Many years of expertise make it possible to develop customized solutions that meet the specific requirements and objectives of your transformation. SAP S/4HANA know-how ensures that the migration runs smoothly and that the full potential of the new platform is exploited. The quality and thorough planning of the implementation as well as the continuous support enable compliance with the highest standards.

Our own data center for hosting your SAP S/4HANA system enables a long-term partnership in which your company is supported from conception to hosting from a single source.

> To mitigate the risk of unrealized benefits, companies must maintain a consistent focus on business value throughout the transformation. AKQUINET supports this through value chain analyses that document current processes end-to-end and identify areas with the highest improvement potential. Based on these insights, the project scope is designed to prioritize functionalities that offer the greatest strategic return. During Phase 0, a business case is developed that weighs the costs of the transformation against the expected efficiency gains and savings. In addition, the SAP Activate methodology provides mechanisms for continuously tracking benefit realization and ensuring that intermediate milestones deliver measurable value. This value-driven governance approach helps prevent isolated departments from pursuing functionality that adds little or no return. A frequently underestimated risk in this context is the premature use of automation technologies. Often, companies attempt to automate inefficient or broken process chains without first addressing underlying weaknesses. The mantra "faster is better" results in flawed processes being codified rather than improved—leading to technical debt that makes future changes more complex and costly. We also observe "tool inflation" in many projects: companies deploy multiple overlapping automation platforms (e.g., UiPath and Tricentis) without a coherent strategy. This creates redundant licensing, operational, and maintenance overhead—without delivering proportional benefit. To avoid these pitfalls, AKQUINET recommends conducting an "Automation Readiness Check" during the preparation phase. Only processes with stable logic, clean data management, and clear business value should be candidates for automation. Technical implementation should then follow a prioritized roadmap to maximize results with minimal effort. Post-implementation, AKQUINET's managed services ensure stable operations and provide capacity for

6.   Summary and outlook:

This analysis makes it clear that **SAP S/4HANA transformation projects** are characterized by a large number of risks - particularly in the areas of budget, time management, technical complexity, organizational anchoring and value realization. Empirical findings from studies by Horváth, DSAG, LeanIX, Gartner and BCG consistently show that projects often fail not because of the technology itself, but because of inadequate preparation, exaggerated expectations and poor risk management.

The success of an **S/4HANA transformation** depends crucially on a holistic, strategically sound approach. Business goals, end-to-end process chains and automation potential must be systematically analysed and operationalized in a robust business case as early as the preparation phase ("Phase 0"). From our project experience at AKQUINET, we therefore recommend a structured transformation model with clear intervention points for each main risk:

- **Value chain analyses** to identify business-critical processes with high value creation potential

Automation readiness checks to specifically automate mature processes and reduce technical debt at an early stage

Consolidated automation platforms (bRobots®) instead of fragmented tool landscapes to ensure scalability and maintainability

Key User as a Service (KUaaS) to avoid bottlenecks in training, testing and productive adoption by experienced users

Change enablement programs with interactive formats, digital training platforms and accompanying communication design for maximum user acceptance

SAP Activate Framework, enhanced with AGIL practices from the akquinet project methodology that anchor flexibility, speed and iteration in implementation

Managed Services & Hypercare to ensure stable operational management and continuous optimization even after go-live

With the expiry of SAP ECC support (2027/2030) and the accelerated development of cloud, AI and ESG, the pressure on companies to act is growing. Those who invest early, systematically address risks and rely on an experienced partner like akquinet will not only migrate on time and on budget, but will also realize sustainable added value for the business.

Digital transformation is not an end in itself - it is a strategic lever for securing competitiveness. SAP S/4HANA offers a powerful platform for this. The crucial question is not whether, but how companies shape this transformation.

7. Why AKQUINET?

AKQUINET differentiates itself through an integrative end-to-end approach that covers all phases of your SAP S/4HANA transformation - from strategic preparation to stable live operation:

7.1. In-depth industry and technological expertise

With over 300 successful S/4HANA projects in industry, retail, utilities and public administration, we have well-founded best practices for every company size and maturity level. Our consultants combine core SAP expertise (activation, module and industry knowledge) with methodological expertise from lean and agile approaches.

7.2. Phase 0 Accelerator: Risk Analysis & Business Case

As early as the pre-project phase, we use a tried-and-tested Phase 0 accelerator that uses standardized workshops and templates to analyse your business goals, process chains and automation potential. This results in a robust business case with clearly defined KPI targets and buffer budgets - the basis for realistic planning and transparent management.

7.3. Value-Chain & Automation Readiness

Our value chain assessment identifies the 10% of processes that deliver 90% of added value. At the same time, we carry out automation readiness checks to automate only mature processes in a targeted manner and reduce technical legacy debt. This ensures short-term quick wins and long-term scalability.

7.4. bRobots® platform and Key User as a Service

Instead of a proliferation of tools, we rely on our bRobots® suite for test, data and process automation. Supplemented by our Key User as a Service model, we ensure that critical specialist user roles are filled and that bottlenecks in training, testing and acceptance do not arise in the first place.

7.5. Change enablement & SAP Activate+Agil

Our change enablement framework combines interactive workshops, a digital learning portal and gamification to anchor acceptance and expertise in the long term. In terms of methodology, we use SAP Activate and supplement it with agile iteration cycles in which we flexibly readjust milestones and mitigate risks at an early stage.

7.6. Managed Services, Hypercare & Hosting

After go-live, our Managed Services & Hypercare teams ensure stable operation 24/7. We also offer dedicated hosting for your S/4HANA system in our certified data center - for maximum availability and long-term partnership "from a single source".

Thanks to this holistic portfolio, you can implement your **SAP S/4HANA transformation** in a predictable, cost-efficient manner and with maximum business benefit.

Akquinet accompanies you from the first workshop to stable productive operation - so that your project not only goes live, but lives and grows.

8. List of sources:

- **Horváth & Partners (10.04.2025):**
  "SAP S/4HANA transformations rarely go as planned - 60 percent exceed budget and schedule, two-thirds dissatisfied with result quality"
  Available online at: www.horvath-partners.com

- **LeanIX (28.07.2022):**
  "SAP S/4HANA 2022 Survey" - Results on ERP modernization and EAM challenges.
  Available online at: www.leanix.net

- **DSAG e.V. (November 2024):**
  "S/4HANA is increasingly becoming a reality in public administration" - Results of the DSAG member survey.
  Available online at: www.dsag.de

- **Computerwoche (12.07.2021):**
  "SAP S/4HANA transformation: Enterprise architects want a say"
  Available online at: www.computerwoche.de

- **ComputerWeekly.de (2023):**
  "You should avoid these mistakes when migrating to S/4HANA" - Guide for project managers.
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- **SAP SE (2024):**
  "End of maintenance for SAP ECC 6.0 EHP 0-5" - SAP Advisory Note on maintenance strategy.
  Internal SAP documentation and customer information.

- **DSAG & LeanIX (2024):**
  "The Estimation Game" - Whitepaper on effort estimation for SAP transformations.
  Available via DSAG/LeanIX channels.

- **SAP SE (2024):**
  "SAP Roadmap Explorer" - Official roadmaps for SAP S/4HANA and SAP BTP.
  Available online at: www.roadmaps.sap.com

- **SAP SE:**
  "SAP Readiness Check - Documentation & Technical Specification"
  Available in the SAP Support Portal.

- **SAP Note 52505:**
  "Maintenance of SAP ERP releases and compatibility with SAP S/4HANA"
  Available in the SAP ONE Support Launchpad.

- **McKinsey & Company (2023):**
  "SAP Migration as a Value Center" - Strategic perspectives on increasing value through ERP transformations.

- **Boston Consulting Group (BCG) (2023):**
  "Transformation Value Realization" - Study on the realization of business value through large-scale transformations.