

# SAP Learning Insights



## SAP Learning Insights Podcast

Transcript Episode 062 – What is SAP - with Bob Szymanski



In this episode of SAP Learning Insights, David Chaviano hosts Bob Szymanski, a university professor from Georgia Southern University and a prominent voice in integrating SAP into academic curricula. The conversation is about the fundamental question: What is SAP? David reveals his desire to present SAP in a beginner-friendly manner, and Bob takes this opportunity to share his insights, experiences and easy to understand examples. Bob presents a clear, straightforward definition of SAP, describing it not merely as software, but as an enterprise information system that enables business processes. He shares sources for getting more knowledge and insights and at the end, he of course provides his final words of wisdom.

Bob Szymanski on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/robert-szymanski-599b8ab/>

Bob's book on Enterprise Systems: <https://www.amazon.com/Enterprise-Systems-Cornerstone-Integrating-Organizational/dp/1777204992>

SAP - <https://www.sap.com/>

Student Zone on learning.sap.com: <https://learning.sap.com/students>

SAP University Alliances (SAP Community): <https://pages.community.sap.com/topics/university-alliances>

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## Transcript

**David Chaviano:** Hello everybody and welcome to another episode of SAP Learning Insights. I'm David Chaviano and I've come to the realization that we have not ever really started from square one. What actually is SAP? So, the SAP ecosystem is large, it's complex, it's geared towards those who are already in the know. If you've ever did some SAP searches online, most of the stuff out there is going to assume you already know a whole lot about it. So, we aim to explain SAP in a beginner-friendly way today to get a nice introduction, and I couldn't think of any better person to do that for us today than Bob Szymanski, a university professor at Georgia Southern University and one of our key voices in bringing SAP into academia in an approachable way. Bob, thanks for joining us today.

**Bob Szymanski:** It's a pleasure to be here. I'm honored that you asked me to do this and can't wait to talk a little bit about this topic. So, it's something you know I'm passionate about. Yeah.

**David Chaviano:** Indeed. But we always want to start with our hero's origin story. Maybe you can tell a little bit about yourself. Who are you? Where are you from? What did you study? And then how did you find yourself involved in the world of SAP?

**Bob Szymanski:** Sure. And I'd like to think it's an unconventional path, but you never know how people get to where they are. So, I'm Bob Szymanski. I grew up in the state of New York, and I think, David, we have that in common, if I'm not mistaken. I did my college work at Boston College. I got both my undergraduate and graduate degrees at Boston College. And my undergraduate degree, believe it or not, was in chemistry. So it's, yeah, it's an interesting kind of far cry from where I am today. So, I did that and found that that really wasn't something that I was going to enjoy for a period of time. So, I went on to get a master's degree and got my MBA. I took that master's degree and moved to Central Florida, the Orlando area, in I think it was 1998. So this goes back 28 years now. And started just doing some operations and management consulting. And in Orlando, the University of Central Florida had reached out to me and asked if I would mind being an adjunct professor for a class. And I said, sure. And then one class led to two classes and then to three classes, and then they had a full-time position. And I was teaching in the information systems department, which was kind of in line with what I was doing with my MBA, kind of focused on the information systems area because I found it was pretty neat and exciting.

And early 2000s, maybe 2002, maybe sometime around there, actually a professor at Georgia Southern University came to the University of Central Florida to introduce our department to SAP and the SAP University Alliances.

Said, this is something we should get engaged with. And our department chair asked for volunteers and no hands went up. So I did, myself and another colleague. And so, this was the early 2000s. And at the time, I had no idea what resources were out there. Training, knew nothing about it, didn't even know what the system looked like to begin with. I attended my first SAP University Alliance academic conference, finally saw what SAP was, and I said, okay, I'm ready to dive in. And I was kind of self-taught for a couple of years and lived by the motto from one error message to the next.

So I tell my students, if you're not making mistakes, you're not learning. But that carried on and I just grew with it and grew and grew. In 2010, I took an offer at Georgia Southern University and started teaching SAP classes there. They were looking for someone who had SAP certification, which I did, taught student certification and other SAP classes. I went to University of South

Carolina in 2015, primarily doing executive education work with the U.S. Army, who runs SAP, and spent seven years with them and their finance program. And that was a bit of a commute for me. So I didn't move to South Carolina, stayed where I was in Savannah. And finally, the time was right. They had another opportunity at Georgia Southern in 2022. And I went back home, so to speak. And it's been my SAP career. I said yes at the right time and absolutely have zero regrets about doing it. It's been fantastic.

**David Chaviano:** Amazing. That sounds like we've got the perfect person on the podcast then.

**Bob Szymanski:** Let's hope so.

**David Chaviano:** Got the full history of it. All right. For those folks out there, who have no idea what we're talking about, maybe you can break it down better than anybody else. What actually is SAP in plain English?

**Bob Szymanski:** Yeah, that's interesting because it's so much. It's hard to say what SAP is as one thing because it is so much. And I would, you know, some people would say, oh, SAP, that's software, right? It's business software. But I like to think of SAP as a business information system. And technically, it's an enterprise information system. And in reality, in simple terms, it's a business process enabler. That's what it is. It's an information system that helps businesses run their business, all aspects of the business. And so, any technology tool or information system you need to make your business successful, that's who SAP is. That's what it does. And again, it's so much, so massive. But in a nutshell, that's how I would probably describe it.

**David Chaviano:** Okay. And just to, I guess, maybe nail down a specific example to help ground some folks, like you said, it helps businesses run. Could you describe some of the processes maybe that would be familiar to a beginner that SAP would run?

**Bob Szymanski:** Yeah. You know, I like to use personal examples when I teach because that's something you can relate to. So, I'll start with a business example would be warehouse management. Okay. And at home, we do warehouse management all the time. We just don't think that we do warehouse management. So, the example is you go to the store, you buy a gallon of milk, you bring it home, you put it in your refrigerator on the top shelf, and you realize, well, I probably should have got a second gallon. So, the next day you go and get another gallon of milk and you bring it to the refrigerator. Now you have a decision to make. Where am I going to put that milk? I haven't opened either one. Am I going to put it in front of the other one or am I going to put it behind the other one? And the most logical decision is not the date you bought it, but the date it expires, right?

**Bob Szymanski:** So, in essence, that's what warehouse management systems help support. When businesses buy materials, sometimes those materials have expiration dates. Sometimes they have, you know, a particular product life. Sometimes they're hazardous materials. And those things need to be separated and stored and used so that you don't waste the materials. Because if you have a material that's high obsolescence, you could lose it, right? Just like the milk in the refrigerator.

**Bob Szymanski:** So, these large warehouses that are hundreds of yards big, I can't even imagine how many square feet or square meters they are inside. They have tons and tons of materials in there. And they need to make sure that those are managed when they come into the warehouse, put in the right places so that when they're needed, you can go ahead and withdraw the correct materials and pick the materials from the warehouse that you need. And when you think about our refrigerator, we can manage that, right? You know, our brains can process that. But if you've got a warehouse with 100,000 materials in it, our brains have the capability, but we can't process at that speed, right? So we need technologies and tools to do that. And so, SAP is a process enabler. So it's going to help manage the whole process of bringing things into that warehouse, making sure they're stored where they need to be and the way they're supposed to be stored, right? Keeping things separated, looking at expiration dates, and then pulling them out and picking them out of the warehouse when the time comes for them. So that's just kind of a simple example that I think that we often do in our daily lives. If you've got time, I'll give you another one that I kind of relate to our personal lives.

So the procurement process, right? So, companies buy items all the time. They buy products. And when they buy the products, they create an official document called a purchase order. That purchase order gets sent to the supplier, and the supplier agrees to it, fulfills it, ships it to the business, and now the business receives it. So now they have the value of the materials in inventory. They have received what they ordered. And then the supplier is going to send them an invoice. Okay.

Now, logically, we would think, okay, let's check that invoice because I'm not going to pay for something I didn't order. Right. And I'm not going to pay for something if the price wasn't right. And again, we can relate that to our personal lives. Anytime you've gone out to a restaurant, and you've ordered food from the server, that's like a purchase order. You've placed an order.

What you've ordered has a price that's agreed to between you and the restaurant, the quantities that you've ordered, right? And then the server delivers it to you, just like the supplier delivers it to the business. So now you've received what you've ordered, okay? And at the end of your meal, the server delivers the guest check. That's your invoice. Now, I would hope most people don't just randomly pay that guest check. They don't look at it. They just give the credit card and off you go. But we do what we call an invoice verification. That's the technical term. But in a more practical sense, we look at that guest check. Is what we ordered on the guest check? Is it the right quantities? Maybe I ordered two glasses of wine, but they actually only delivered one, but the guest check has two on it. Do we want to pay for what we didn't receive? And so that whole concept is on a much larger scope for a business that has purchase orders and they may have thousands of purchase orders that they process globally a day. And so, when those materials come in, they manage that. And then they have to manage the invoice processing to make sure that everything matches up. So, if people can kind of relate to what they do in their personal lives, business is not that much more complicated, but the scope is much bigger. And so, you need systems and tools to help manage those processes. And that's what SAP does. It helps check that invoice for you against what you ordered and what the supplier delivered to you.

**David Chaviano:** That makes sense. But maybe to, maybe let me pick at this a little bit. I have maybe a half-baked idea in my head. Maybe you can help me along here. But I'm thinking something that may be a bit alien to a student or somebody who has not yet worked at a large enterprise. If you could maybe make some example or describe the chaos that would ensue for example in your warehouse management example the chaos that would ensue between the many people working in various departments if they didn't have maybe a central overview or software assisting them in understanding what is located where in their house so you can imagine the receiving department bringing a bunch of pallets of stuff you have the folks taking the stuff out of the warehouse to deliver it elsewhere. Where assuming all of these departments, all these hundreds of people in this organization and managing this warehouse, assuming they didn't have

such a tool that would help everybody get an overview of what's happening with one single source of truth. Maybe you can share some ideas on mistakes, chaos, or things that can happen as a result of not having an overview that everybody can look at at the same time.

**Bob Szymanski:** Yeah, you've actually picked an easy one because I have some real experience with this. I consulted with a company who was running a warehouse system. And when the materials arrived from the supplier, the warehouse system, like an SAP system would, and they weren't using SAP at the time, they were kind of doing things a bit manually, Excel spreadsheets, things like that. But the ideas I talked about with milk, you have to put it in the right place, because there's a process for putting things away and there's a process for picking things and taking it out of the warehouse. And when those steps aren't done correctly, chaos ensues, as you're suggesting, right? So, when materials were arriving from the supplier, on the spreadsheet, they were looking at it and say, okay, here's where I can put it. But unfortunately, sometimes that was wrong. And they go, oh, there's really not space here because no one updated the spreadsheet. That spreadsheet might have been three days old. It wasn't real time. They said, well, I can't put it where the spreadsheet says there's room, so I'm going to go put it someplace else.

So, they do that. So now the materials aren't where the spreadsheet thinks it is, right? Especially if the person doing it doesn't update the spreadsheet with the new location. And this was going on for years. They were doing this. And so it was somewhat chaotic because when they needed something, they couldn't find it. It seemingly wasn't there. Kind of like my wife would tell my son, if you don't put your things away where they belong, you're not going to be able to find them when you need them. So, when he was a little kid, it's just common sense, right? But they were just putting things wherever they could find space. And that became the norm. And so they were no longer following the spreadsheet data. They didn't trust the spreadsheet data because it wasn't in real time.

And I was asked to come in because they were having extremely high purchasing and inventory costs. And it came down to this, that they actually had materials on hand, but because they couldn't find them, the buyers were buying more. Like, oh, we must not have it. I mean, we're talking big warehouses, right? Like huge warehouses. So like trying to find a needle in a haystack, if you don't know exactly where that needle is. And that's what an SAP warehouse management system would support. You would know exactly where that material is. And so, you don't have to go searching for that needle in a haystack. You walk right to the location where it's specified. And so, this was really not only chaotic for the company, it cost them tons and tons of money and time because they were just buying materials and having an overabundance of inventory that wasn't being used. And they would have to throw things out once they would find it that they could no longer use because maybe it was a refrigerated product or some other type of product that was no longer usable. And it cost a ton of money. The end result was the only solution to that. They had to empty the entire warehouse into the yard and start over again because they had no faith and no trust that the data in their system matched what was actually happening.

Now, an SAP system helps resolve that because everything is in real time. So it's not a static, you know, document like a spreadsheet is. When something goes into the warehouse and it's in the system, it automatically updates. So, if I can't put it here and I put it someplace else, the system understands that and people know exactly where to go to get it. Saves the company a lot of money and a lot of time and a lot of headaches and a lot of chaos. Hopefully that's a reasonable example for you. Yes.

**David Chaviano:** Yes. Very helpful. Hopefully it was helpful for other folks out there as well.

**Bob Szymanski:** Yeah.

**David Chaviano:** Okay. So we have a general idea on what this is all about, why it works, why it makes sense for a business to implement such a solution. So a student or a newbie to the topic, why should they care? Let's say somebody's in the middle of their business studies or maybe they're engineering or something. Why should they pay attention to this?

**Bob Szymanski:** Well, they should care for a number of reasons. And let's go back to one of the first questions you asked, what is SAP? And I said, it's big, it does a lot. So if I flip the table and I ask the student the question, you know, if you had to sell something, what information would you need to sell it? How would you manage that? Right.

And they said, well, I would need all this information. I would have to know the product I'm selling and the price I'm selling it and who I sell it to. And then I'd say, well, isn't there also an accounting aspect of that? Right. So, from the accounting side of it, yeah. If I sell something, it might be a cost of goods sold, and my assets in my balance sheet are reduced by the value of the product that I send to the customer, and they start talking about all these things. And in the end, what they learn is that SAP helps you understand your business processes, because it supports those business processes. It enables those business processes. So why should students care? Because process knowledge is at the heart of all this. It's at the heart of all this. If you don't understand why a business has different steps in a business process and what the end goal of a business process is, it's going to be very difficult to use any type of technology or information system. So one, why should they care? Because they will gain more process knowledge if they engage with any type of curriculum that has SAP in it. Because as I mentioned from the beginning, it's a process enabler. You have to understand business processes.

As an example, you know, I teach in the College of Business. I've been teaching in College of Businesses for over a quarter of a century. And most universities are siloed. We have an accounting department, marketing department, finance department, economics department, so on and so forth. But when students start taking the SAP classes that I teach, they say, you know, I'm an accounting major and I kind of learned some of the accounting theory and everything, but I didn't get it until I took this class. Because now I understand the whole business side that impacts what I do as an accountant because my view is very siloed. And when you understand businesses and business processes, your view has to be much larger, right? And we often say this is an enterprise view of the system, enterprise view of the business rather. Okay, so your view has to be much bigger. So people coming out of business programs that have process knowledge, it's incredible because they can now talk the business with business leaders. They don't have to learn different aspects of the business because they already get it. So one, why should they care? Because it's going to give them knowledge beyond what you get in normal curriculum, which is very siloed, very theoretical, very about what you do. Here, their knowledge is broadened because it's much bigger than just one thing, right?

Many different business processes and the integration aspect, right? What are the different functions that it integrates with? So that business process knowledge is incredibly important. Two, let's take a major like marketing. So if you're a student who's a marketing major and you're in a college of business, a pretty good sized college of business, chances are there's 500 or more marketing majors in your college.

How many colleges have marketing degrees? Okay, so now you're multiplying, let's say, 500 majors by however many business programs have marketing degrees. And now you're coming out of college, it's going to be pretty darn competitive, isn't it? So how are you going to compete against somebody else coming out of a program with the same business knowledge you have? Well, very simple. If you have SAP knowledge, that's a differentiator, right? And especially SAP certifications, that may be something that we can talk about a little bit later. But if you have SAP knowledge, and I've got two candidates, one here who's a marketing major, took their degree, did

very well. Another one over here did the same thing. But this one over here has that SAP experience, that enterprise view of the business, that knowledge of what an ERP system is or an enterprise system is. That's a differentiator, okay? They both may be very good candidates, but now I've got a candidate over here who has something most known, right? And so students should care about this because it's going to be a differentiating factor for them in a competitive marketplace. So, I think that gives them an edge and they should definitely consider engaging in this and learning more about business using SAP.

**David Chaviano:** All right. Makes sense. And I suppose it's quite helpful to get the practical application of what you just learned. And not only that, how it interconnects with the things that you maybe didn't learn yet to complete the picture.

All right. So on the topic of learning, I think most listeners hopefully are familiar with [learning.sap.com](https://learning.sap.com), a place where people can go to learn. But you as a subject matter expert, maybe you can comment on where students can learn some more about this and gain some competency in SAP. be.

**Bob Szymanski:** Yeah, so [learning.sap.com](https://learning.sap.com), if you put a forward slash students at the end of that, so [learning.sap.com/slash-students](https://learning.sap.com/slash-students), students can go in there and get access to the student edition of the SAP Learning Hub. And what an incredible value it is because there's no subscription fee for it for students. And I don't think students understand how valuable that is and what value they're getting by going in there. And they have access to hundreds and hundreds of different courses on the various aspects of SAP. So right at the very beginning, we said SAP is a lot, right? It's a whole bunch of different things. But maybe you're really interested in artificial intelligence. And that's just a niche area that you want to focus on. Well, you can go into that learning hub, student edition, and browse for courses in artificial intelligence and take an online course without having to pay anything. There are journeys and there are courses. and a lot of times the learning journeys is a group of courses that take you on a path that lead towards some type of industry certification. And if we talk about differentiators, you have that student who has SAP experience, but now if you have an industry certified, industry recognized certification.

I mean, that just shoots them to the top of the stack in the resume list. So they have a lot of resources for any areas that they're interested in. And furthermore, they might be able to find an interest. So maybe they get into artificial intelligence and go, well, this is cool, but it's not me. I'm kind of more interested in sales. Is there anything on CRM? You can go in there and you can look up courses for things that you're interested in and say, okay, I'm really finding a knowledge area now that I really enjoy and I can learn for free and possibly even get an industry certification by doing this. And it doesn't cost a penny for students to do that. So it's really a great thing that SAP is giving students incredible opportunity.

**David Chaviano:** I can only concur. So, SAP Learning Hub is actually sold for a significant amount of money to consultants out there. So, if you're getting this for free as a student, definitely take advantage of that.

All right. So, people have a general guideline on where they can go, study for certification. I know you as an educator, so maybe you want to say a couple of words about what you do at your program at your university. And I do understand that you've published books on the topic as well. So maybe you want to share a little bit about that? Absolutely.

**Bob Szymanski:** So I am a member or our university is a member of the SAP University Alliance. The SAP University Alliance is kind of a branch of SAP. They provide kind of an infrastructure for

many universities across the globe to get access to SAP systems and create curriculum that's used in the classroom. So I've been doing this for well over 20 years, and I teach SAP on a number of different levels. And right now at Georgia Southern University, we have an enterprise systems path for students. And in that path, we have a number of courses that have SAP as part of the curriculum. We have an introductory management information systems class where we teach them what information systems is. And as part of that class, we teach them about SAP and ERP. So students actually get some hands-on experience.

Performing some of the processes that we talked about earlier, a sales process or a purchasing process or even a manufacturing process. So they can understand how this technology actually works and they can kind of now bring the pieces together a little bit. Then students can move on to a more higher level class where we focus specifically on SAP and integrated aspects of business. So how one part of the business impacts another part of the business. So as I mentioned, if we move materials and inventory for sales, that's going to also impact accounting, could impact warehouse management. And so students become more well-versed in the overall impacts of business from various transactions in the system. And then we also have a configuration class where students can actually build a company from scratch using SAP S for Honda. And I'm like, wow, how amazing is that? I guess student can come in there and say, okay, I want to start up a company and I want to run SAP and they learn how to go in a system at a very high level, not terribly deep, but they can create their own company in a system. And in the end, their company is buying materials, storing them in inventory.

Converting those raw materials to finished goods and selling them to customers and keeping track of it in the record to report process, the accounting side of it, generating financial statements. And in the end, there's a great level of satisfaction said everything that I just did or everything my business is doing, I built that. So they get a real sound understanding of all that stuff. We also incorporate some cloud technology in there, SAP Activate methodology, a little bit about the SAP business suite so that they have an understanding of what's going on out there in the real world. So to kind of tie it all together. And then students have capability of getting certification. So all of this leads up to industry certification where they can go into that student edition of the Learning Hub and take a recommended certification course. So you had referenced a book that I wrote. So there's a book that I wrote that's out there, and maybe we can share the link in the podcast on how to get that book. And it's really designed to help students get that certification. So it kind of puts into terms that they can really understand because a lot of these undergraduate students don't have the business acumen. They haven't been in industry. And a lot of them will say, you know, they say I need at least two to three years or five years of experience and I don't have that. So they need to upskill themselves. So this book was basically written to help students understand these things in a manner that's easier to them because they don't have the industry background to talk about it at that level.

And they can end up having good conversations during interviews and talk about the business. And sometimes that is enough. That's a good enough sales pitch to get an interview or get hired or go down the road and take the next steps towards their careers. So that's really the goal of it. I didn't write the book as a profit making thing. I wrote the book because I thought it would be really beneficial and helpful for students to learn and understand this.

**David Chaviano:** Brilliant. All right. So we're on to 30 minutes already, and I think we've only just scratched the surface, but I think this is a great primer for people to figure out if this is something that they want to study or look into. We always want to, of course, thank our guests for your time, Bob, and also close on maybe some words of wisdom for our listeners, especially those maybe career starters or newbies out there that are considering whether they should go further and study something about SAE.

**Bob Szymanski:** Yeah, I mean, in reality is if you want to give yourself a leg up against others in a really competitive marketplace right now. And furthermore, where there are opportunities, find those opportunities. And many students may not realize this, but a lot of companies are still in the process of moving to SAP S4 HANA. And they haven't gotten there yet on their journey. and there could be a real need for such talent in the SAP ecosystem to help those companies get to that point. And through programs like ours and the SAP University Alliance, students are getting hands-on access to technologies that some businesses haven't even engaged in yet. And so this could be a real game changer for students and put them, you know, kind of put them at a level where they never thought they could be in terms of being in the marketplace and competitive for these positions that are out there. So if they want to make a difference and really put themselves in the best position to succeed, this is a great way of doing it. And if nothing else, they're going to learn a whole lot about how businesses actually run, not in theory, but in practice. And that's really, really important because if they don't have that inner experience, they have this experience working in the SAP system, which is invaluable.

**David Chaviano:** Perfect. I couldn't have said that any better than you, Bob. Thank you so much for your time.

**Bob Szymanski:** You concur again?

**David Chaviano:** I concur wholeheartedly. Get out there and study, folks. Thanks for your time, Bob. Thanks for joining us today.

**Bob Szymanski:** Always enjoy chatting with you. This is fabulous. Again, I'm honored to be asked to do this. Thank you very much.

**David Chaviano:** All right. Thanks, everybody, for listening. Until next time. Bye-bye.