

HITTING YOUR MARK

TIPS FOR ENSURING THE SUCCESS OF YOUR NEXT IT PROJECT

Let's tell it like it is—when it comes to project management, IT has it tougher than most.

Unlike the solid, tangible results of manufacturing or construction projects, IT project goals are a moving target—complicated by shifting business needs, demanding stakeholders and rapidly changing technology. Given that IT projects are so difficult to execute, how can you ensure your next one will hit the mark?

For starters, read this article. It's full of good ideas to help new, and even veteran project managers manage IT projects more successfully.

REVISIT PROJECT PLANNING 101

Many new project managers receive little or no training on how to do their jobs. But even if you've been at it awhile, it never hurts to brush-up on the basics:

- Projects are short-term efforts to create a unique product, service or environment (e.g., develop a new corporate website, merge existing databases, etc.).
- Project constraint factors include time, cost and scope. All must be balanced for the project to succeed.
- From implementation to planning, projects move through five phases: initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing.

RECOGNIZE AND ADDRESS COMMON IT PROJECT PITFALLS

- Poor planning. Realistically consider: the resources you need to devote to



your project; the skills and people required to do the job correctly; the time needed to adequately create, test and implement project deliverables (be sure to allow for short-term productivity losses due to the learning curve).

- Rushing through implementation. Even if your company is relying on your project to remain competitive, don't rush it. Being first to market with a new technology will prove disastrous if it doesn't work properly.
- Biting off more than you can chew. Conquer an unwieldy project by breaking it down into smaller, more digestible pieces. A series of smaller projects allows for more manageable endeavors, increasing the likelihood of overall success.

DETERMINE SUCCESS CRITERIA

Before beginning the project, identify your stakeholder's interests and expectations. Define clear and measurable business goals, which will in turn imply your project success criteria (e.g., staying under budget, delivering specific functionality, etc.). Make your success criteria measurable and trackable so you'll know at a glance how things are progressing—you'll improve

your team's effectiveness, while reducing frustration and stress.

WRITE A DETAILED PLAN

A useful project plan should include the following elements:

- Breakdown of the tasks to be performed. Break large tasks into smaller components to help you estimate your needs more accurately.
- Staff, budget and other resource estimates and plans.
- Team roles and responsibilities.
- Plans for acquiring and training the staff you need.
- Assumptions, dependencies, contingencies and risks.
- Details of, and target dates for, major deliverables.
- Tracking and monitoring processes.
- Metrics to be used.
- Management provisions for subcontractor relationships, if applicable.

The time you spend analyzing and detailing your plan now will reduce the number of surprises you have to deal with later.



KNOW WHEN TO PULL THE PLUG

Time and cost overruns, or shifting business conditions, may make it necessary to kill an IT project. Make sure your project plan includes criteria for deciding when it's time to disconnect the life support. If scrapping the project seems too daunting, you may choose to scale-back the project, or create smaller projects that provide some return on sunken costs.

TRACK YOUR PROGRESS AND RESULTS

- Record actual and estimates. Improve your estimating approach by recording the actual effort/time spent on each task and comparing it to your estimates. Anything less is just guessing, and won't teach you a thing.
- Don't check it off until it's done. Really, 100% all-the-way done.
- Track honestly and openly. Q: How does an IT project become three months late? A: One day at a time. Joking aside, your project will only be as successful as your tracking is accurate. Create a climate in which your team members feel safe reporting project status—even when goals are missed. Use this status information to take corrective action when necessary.

CELEBRATE THE SMALL SUCCESSES

IT projects are chock-full of stress, frustration and anxiety. So when your team does hit the mark, achieving even a secondary goal, be sure to celebrate your success. When you're all under pressure, a simple pat on the back can have a tremendously positive effect.

MAKE REALISTIC WORK ESTIMATES

- Make allowances for task-switching. Switching among tasks creates thought and process inefficiencies that reduce individual productivity. As a rule of thumb, schedule only 80% of multi-taskers' time.
- Build in training time and learning curves. High-tech fields demand that practitioners devote time to ongoing education, which must be built into project estimates. In addition, any new technology adopted must be taught to internal users.
- Estimate based on effort, not calendar time. Your employees may work 40 hours per week, but not all of it is focused on project completion. Meetings, emergency requests and waiting for needed information all diminish the effective weekly project hours your employees have to devote.

NEGOTIATE ACHIEVABLE COMMITMENTS

Actively manage expectations by negotiating with customers, managers and team members whenever there is a gap between project realities and committed goals. Life happens—unanticipated problems arise, risks materialize, new requirements are added—so you must incorporate these changes into your commitments to keep the project on-track.

CONTROL PROJECT RISKS—DON'T LET THEM CONTROL YOU

To ensure the success of your IT project, you must plan for the worst by developing a comprehensive risk management proposal:

- Identify potential problems that could impact project success;
- Determine how likely each problem is to happen;
- Calculate the negative consequences for the project if each does occur;
- Create mitigation actions (e.g., contingency buffers) to reduce either probability or impact of each risk.

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