

Increasing the Odds for Project Success

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From the novice project manager to the more seasoned project management professional, garnering a successful project is not always easily attained. With organizations increasingly striving to achieve more results with less people, it becomes challenging to achieve success when top level executives are more concerned with the bottom line rather than the goal line. Frustrating as it may seem, experience is sometimes overshadowed by an organizations lack of knowledge of how beneficial a project manager and their department can be.

So then how can a project manager achieve project success in today's business world?

First we must look at what all projects from any organization or industry have in common. All projects, big or small, have a pre-defined scope before the project ever begins. Scope helps to determine what the end deliverables must be to achieve success. Projects must also have a defined start and end date and must adhere to that schedule as closely as possible to stay within budget. Any adjustment in schedule will almost certainly impact your labor, equipment and material costs. Finally, what all projects have in common are the stakeholders or end users. They have specific quality, cost and time expectations for the product being delivered that they are expecting to be met.

And when projects are completed, the following questions undoubtedly surface: did the project meet its intended purpose, was the product delivered on time and on budget and did it meet stakeholder expectations?

Of course these are just a few of the many thoughts running through the mind of a project manager at the end of a project. Some are simply relieved that the ongoing stress of dealing with senior managers and unrealistic time and cost constraints is over. But what many organizations overlook is the severity that project failure has in the business world today. Each year, project failure costs private and public sectors of the business world billions of dollars in resources, not to mention an incredible amount of wasted time that can never be recovered.

Studies have been conducted on thousands of projects worldwide and the results are less than stellar. In fact, of the over 13,000 projects that were surveyed*, only 34% of them were successfully completed. 43% of those projects experienced overrun costs, 82% had time overruns and 52% had features and functions that simply never made it into the final product. While organizations continue to hire and train employees to be project managers, they can only be as effective as the organization will support.

There has been much speculation as to the causes of project failure: inadequate communications, lack of senior management support and understanding, inflexible procurement approaches. But many project management professionals who work in the field on a daily basis have said the greatest cause of project failure is the inadequate defining of project objectives and lack of a project measurement system.

A project measurement system is your greatest tool in your fight to attain successful projects. The four aspects of any project measurement system are as follows: Status (what is?), Progress (what is or what should have been?), Forecast (where are we going to be?) and Path Forward (bring back to optimal condition?). These "real time" project measurement tools determine the project drivers and priorities; tolerances and performance. By creating tools to measure what truly is a successful project, you can work backwards to create the information needed to effectively deal with obtaining success and mitigating failure. With these systems in place, you'll gain timely information on how to deal with real world issues that arise during the project life cycle.

But how can one develop such a measuring system? The answer is there are thousands. Every organization and industry requires a different set of measuring criteria used during the project life cycle. Therefore there is no one answer on how a system can be created. However, here are some general ideas on creating a plan in your organization:

- It must support the organization's strategic priorities
- Performance measures must be aligned and tailored to the needs of the project
- Objectives and tolerance must be identified
- Required time, effort and expertise as well as senior management support
- Must allow for corrective actions for "out of tolerance" measures
- Should not be cumbersome to apply or manage during the project life cycle

The key to achieving anything in life is knowledge and the world of project management is no different. By creating a project measurement system, you will then possess the knowledge of what can and will go wrong and how best to mitigate it when it does - a kind of proactive risk management if you will. When you fully understand the causes of project failure, you'll be better able to avoid the pitfalls that occur when they appear unexpectedly.

But even with this system in place, there is still one critical element needed for project completion and that's experienced project managers that realize the importance of communication, application and education, and passing that along to all of the members of their team.

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**Source: 2003 Chaos Study by the Standish Group
Some additional information taken from BPC Management Consultants © 2001-2005*