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Leading Complex IT Projects: The Bottom Line — Part I

[By Rafael Pabon]

Successful project coordination is, at the core, an exercise in relationship management and resource allocation to achieve a desired result. Some resources fall outside of your direct sphere of influence, which poses an extra challenge. The right leadership technique will raise the probability of a successful outcome.

In Part I of this article series, we focus on leading the planning initiative. The following list provides guidelines for successful projects.

1. Get Involved Early in the Strategic Planning Process Before the Project Is Officially Approved

As an IT project manager, you can only "work" relationships you have cultivated, especially if you are looking for assistance on a challenging deliverable. Get to know the key business and technical sponsors. Draw a picture of the interrelated players and pieces with a sketched timeline, and get buy-in from all the stakeholders.

Understand their departmental goals and how your project fits within the larger organizational context. There may be strategic factors at play that affect optimal implementation choices, such as SEC/compliance mandates, upcoming M&A activity, or another divisions' global product launch. In a vacuum, you may choose one path, but with consideration of upcoming regulatory, competitive, or internal changes, you may choose another.

There are project planning trade-offs in terms of complexity, timing, and budget. These issues should be weighed before looking at the technical details and before finalizing the project plan.

2. Define Project Success Metrics and Risk Factors in Terms of Business Objectives

Defining IT projects in business terms and clarifying options with business sponsors reduces conflict and confusion and expedites decision making. IT managers who define projects in technical terms may not make the right decisions or evaluate priorities in line with a business unit's goals.

For example, when a buggy systems conversion at a global brokerage firm was going to delay monthly reports by two weeks, the IT staff hesitated and wanted to reallocate resources to fix everything the following month. But the business unit assured them this setback was not nearly as important as having the newly developed content and format 100% ready for the upcoming quarterly reporting season. So the conversion proceeded as planned, with no impact on other IT projects, and both the company president and customers were pleased with the final results.

The ultimate business goal dictates the best option and risk management strategy. Choose solutions and timelines according to the financial and strategic end goals. Define deliverables in real business terms — cost reduction, client satisfaction, increased profits, and regulatory compliance.

What are the true deadlines — are they hard, or is there a fudge factor? Are there critical business consequences of rescheduling? Is it a strategic imperative, and if so, why?

If a $100 million account is on the line, you may choose more frequent milestones and add additional resources to mitigate delivery risk, rather than keep in your back pocket the option of bringing in a contract programmer mid-project to solve any unexpected problems.

The context of the deadline is as important as the date itself. You might have a mutiny on your hands if that conversion to an outsourced low cost Web 2.0 system has a glitch and delays commission checks for all of your company's sales force.

3. Project Management Software is Overused and Overrated.

Strive to be much more than a "checkmark gatherer." Project management excellence goes way beyond the tools used to perform the job. Generating extensive records and complex task lists may feel productive, but not all tasks are created equal. I often give more credence to scribbles on a napkin and original thought. It is too easy to lose the forest for the trees.

It's more valuable to know where you stand with the project holistically and to have a more extensive knowledge of

FEATURE

only the highest priorities. Professionals who approach their job as a pure project management role do not drill down on the major issues and are in danger of losing key context. Anything more than 12 months out is partial speculation. Keep your focus on the upcoming six to 12 months.

"75% of tasks completed" means nothing unless the last 25% will be completed on time, on budget, on target, and that you understand the risks of any last minute project changes.

Most technical projects have several possible solutions with multiple implementation paths plus the potential to build "hooks" for future enhancements. To reduce risk, you need to understand whether your project is delivering a pinpoint solution or a more flexible system, so you can maintain coherence if anything changes. How quickly can you react if a sponsor asks you to evaluate the impact of requirement or budget changes, or if a key employee or vendor is no longer available?

In the upcoming Part II of this article, we will focus on leading the project process.

If you are interested in applying these ideas to your current projects, please contact Rafael Pabon at www.shermanhillgroup. com/shgroup1/contact_us.htm.

About the Author

Rafael Pabon combines information technology and Internet expertise with his extensive experience in sales, marketing, and strategic management to help companies reach higher levels of scale, scope, and profitability. His background encompasses designing knowledge management systems for Fortune 500 companies, managing outsourcing programs for financial firms, and implementing innovative financial, customer support, compliance, and sales systems.

Mr. Pabon's clients include Morgan Stanley, Thomson Financial, JPMorgan Chase, Advanta Growth Capital LP, and Dover Corporation. Recent engagements include a four-year technology and operational outsourcing project for an investment bank,

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