

# Going Beyond Planning to Project Execution

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Project plans are excellent for providing objectives and guidelines, but they are worthless unless project managers can use them to actually execute their projects. Unfortunately, many project managers struggle with execution. Whether it is overblown budgets or timelines, there are countless project mines to navigate. Fortunately, best practices enable project managers to easily manage resources, keep projects on track and communicate effectively with upper management.

## Threats to a Project's Success

According to a 2008 report by Gartner, 15 percent of all technology projects failed that year because of high cost variance, while 18 percent were unsuccessful because they were substantially late. This means that in 2008, one in three technology projects failed. Such projects primarily involve the management of human resources in order to accomplish the target schedule, cost and quality, so it is safe to assume that poor resource management played a large role in the high rate of project failure that occurred last year.

Project managers need to know, in a pinch, what people are working on and what their availability is for future projects. They also need to be able to isolate the problem when a project is not going according to plan. Ignorance in these areas can be lethal, so in order to successfully execute on projects, project managers need to be able to answer the following questions at all times:

- How much work have my team members completed?
- How much work is left for my team members to complete?
- Are we behind on any of our tasks? If so, who do I need to speak to about that?
- Do my team members need more time to complete their tasks?
- Are the right resources available for my next project?

Without an effective system in place, project managers are constantly intruding on team members to get estimates, then scrambling to present that information, clearly and concisely, to upper management. Of course, the project manager is often the last person to find out when one of his or her critical resources has been magically "reassigned" to another high profile project!

Many organizations believe it is enough to simply track project progress on a percent complete basis. Unfortunately, this way of thinking is not consistent with established methodologies. From the Project Management Institute to the Software Engineering Institute, most experts agree that the only accurate measure of progress is tracking work effort (i.e., time).

## Best Practices for Execution

The key to effective resource management is up-to-date visibility. Even when project managers begin to understand resource availability, it can change due to vacation time, sick leave or resource reassignment. For

this reason, project managers need a system that allows team members to update their schedules, tasks and available time, as well as request additional time for tasks when necessary. Such a system should also be Web-based, allowing team members and project managers to access it from anywhere. In today's world, project and resource management systems that do not enable user access outside of the office are obsolete.

Project managers also need to understand true project cost in order to know whether or not the ROI is sufficient. No organization can afford to spend time and money on projects that are not profitable, and having a clear understanding of cost is the only way to avoid making this mistake. Because the majority of project costs now come from employee time, effective resource management and time tracking is absolutely necessary. Knowing which projects are bringing in significant ROI and which are not will enable project managers and executives to focus their efforts with more precision.

Insight into project cost and status will also give project managers early warnings when problems arise. For example, if a project manager sees that 15 percent of the budget has been spent and only 5 percent of the work has been completed, he or she can identify the problem and take action right away, while there is still time to salvage the project. Finding this out late in the project, however, will inevitably lead to failure.

### **The Choice is Yours**

The project managers who succeed are not the ones who create elaborate plans, but the ones who take it one step further to execute their projects, achieving organizational objectives and bringing in significant ROI. When team members track time by task and project, project managers can do just that through accurate project scheduling, proactive problem solving and a real understanding of costs.

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