The FBI Virtual Case File Project: A Schedule Management Analysis

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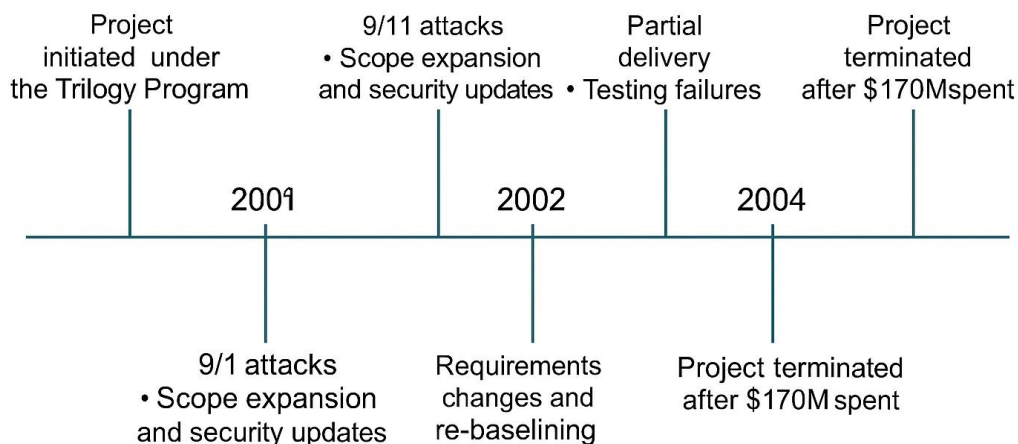
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In the year 2000, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) initiated the Virtual Case File (VCF) project under a broader initiative, known as the Trilogy Program, to replace the deteriorating Automated Case Support (ACS) system and to support secure communication of information electronically. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the need for the FBI to rapidly and in an integrated manner access its investigative data and information became paramount. The VCF project would be set up so that field agents would have a single, electronically-driven case management system that would increase cooperation through its divisions (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2007). Those involved included some FBI leaders, the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the primary contractor, Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC). The project was originally budgeted at $380 million and had a timetable of about three years. The project was canceled in 2005 after about $170 million was spent and there was no product to show for those investments (Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General [DOJ OIG], 2005).

Figure 1

Timeline of the FBI Virtual Case File Project (2000–2005)

Note: Timeline mapping key events and delays in the FBI Virtual Case File project. GAO (2007) and DOJ OIG (2005)

Project Schedule Planning

The VCF schedule relied on a waterfall strategy with firm, sequential events and minimal leeway. The timing, which was politically time constrained, disregarded system complexity, and requirements were unclear and constantly changing—but there were no formal tools in estimating time, like Critical Path Method (CPM) or Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) (GAO, 2007). Leadership turnover and poor distribution of resources resulted in an unreliable schedule. For every delay, no buffers or risk allocations were factored in, so any delay resulted in a linear effect on the missed milestone.

Execution of the Schedule

The project promptly fell behind schedule. It was supposed to be complete in 2003, but only partial modules were available in 2004 and they did not work properly (DOJ OIG, 2005). The FBI overlapped design, development, and testing of the IA and its tools to get back the time that had been lost, thereby causing rework and additional delays. There was insufficient oversight of contractors, SAIC was paid in full even when deadlines were missed, and reports of progress overstated completion (GAO, 2007). Although additional security needs surfaced after 9/11, the FBI did not re-baseline the overall schedule, contributing to more delays.

Monitoring and Controlling

The tracking of the schedule was limited to minimal checks. Progress was reported based on qualitative information only, without undertaking earned value analysis or tracking schedule variance. The DOJ OIG (2005) documented that oversight of the project lacked measurable

milestones and measures of risk. Without any tracking of a quantitative nature, delays were detected too late to remedy. Although the project would not have been exempt from delays, holding regular milestone reviews, updating the baseline as required and having a timeframe metric could have provided advance notice of the delay potential as well as increased accountability for results (GAO, 2007).

Lessons Learned

The Virtual Case File project of the FBI highlights common failures of schedule management which provide helpful lessons for future large-scale IT projects. Table 1 summarizes the key lessons, problems and recommendations for improvement from the scheduling management practices of the project.

Table 1
Lessons Learned from the FBI Virtual Case File Project

Lesson	Issue	Improvement
Unrealistic deadlines	Schedule driven by politics	No tracking of work in original estimates
No schedule buffers	No planning for rework	Add time buffers and do risk analysis (GAO, 2007).
Weak change control	Frequent changes in scope	Implement formal change management processes (DOJ OIG, 2005).
Poor monitoring	No tracking of work in original estimates	Use earned value and milestone reviews (DOJ OIG, 2005).

Note: Adapted from GAO (2007) and DOJ OIG (2005).

Recommendations for future projects

Project leaders should take the following actions to avoid future failures like the VCF:

1) Embrace iterative scheduling (Agile or phased delivery) to allow for flexibility (GAO, 2007).

2) Use analytical estimation tools such as CPM and PERT to produce realistic timelines.

3) Make sure to account for risk buffers where there is uncertainty in the activities.

4) Include quantitative monitoring of progress through earned value and milestone reviews (DOJ OIG, 2005).

5) Hold contractors accountable with payments based on milestones and oversight.

Summary

To conclude, the VCF project did not fail due to a shortfall in financial resources, but rather due to a failure of schedule governance—an unrealistic schedule, little oversight of the schedule, and inflexibility. Structured techniques of schedule (time) management and continuous monitoring would have changed the outcome to be more timely.

References

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