FBI Virtual Case File (VCF) Project: A Schedule Management Analysis

Krisha Kaushik Lakhani

Information Systems, Northeastern University

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Professor Shirali Patel

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In 2000, the FBI initiated the Virtual Case File (VCF) project as part of the Trilogy program to replace the aging Automated Case Support (ACS) system and allow agents to more efficiently share files from an investigation, especially related to counter-terrorism issues following the events of September 11, 2001 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). The project was based on the directives of FBI leadership, support from the field, work from the Information Technology contractor Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), DOE management, and Congress oversight, and was planned to cost a total of $380 million with a three-year timeline (Smith, 2005). By 2005, the project had been canceled with virtually nothing developed or an expected outcome from the investment of nearly $170 million, mainly due to poor judgement with schedule management and overall execution of the project plan (GAO, 2007).

Project Schedule Management

Planning

The VCF timeline was too optimistic. Time frames were set without a valid historical database of IT project schedules or a valid process for resource allocation for the projected amount of time. The baseline timelines did not include changes to requirements such as security measures required after 9/11 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). A phased or incremental delivery plan wasn't established as a best practice. The approach was a "big bang" which increased risk (Smith, 2005).
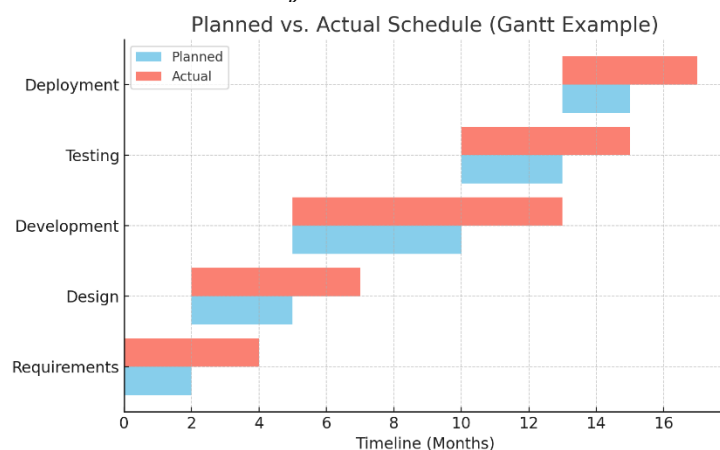
Execution

There were significant deviations during the execution. There were many missed deadlines due to a lack of coordination between the contractors and the FBI, revised requirements, and a lack of consistent leadership. Milestones were missing and pilot testing indicated that the system did not work (GAO, 2007). Instead of moving towards incremental rollouts or agile approaches, the FBI sought to complete the project under an inflexible collapsing schedule (Smith, 2005).

Monitoring and Controlling

The FBI did not have usable earned value management (EVM) or other monitoring tools to measure schedule progress. Contractor oversight was inconsistent, and there were no performance standards for deliverables based on performance metrics. In the event of a delay, the FBI often dealt with the situation by changing the deadlines instead of addressing the underlying causes, resulting in more overruns (GAO, 2007).

Figure 1
Planned vs. Actual Project Schedule

Note. The chart shows schedule slippage across phases, a common issue in the FBI's Virtual Case File project.

Lessons Learned

The VCF collapse showcases how bad schedule management can ruin even a well-funded project. The reasons for failure include:

- Implausible planning developed without taking any historical benchmarks into account (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

- Poor oversight of contractors and absence of performance measures (GAO, 2007).

- No incremental milestones so that any delays would be fatal (Smith, 2005).

- Controlling the project reactively and dealing with issues later rather than earlier (GAO, 2007).

If best practices were employed - phased development, redundancy time for high-risk items, and a formal monitoring tool - the FBI could have identified risks earlier and adjusted the schedule to best reflect a changing situation (Smith, 2005).

Recommendations

- Build Credible Baselines - Utilize data from comparable past projects and make conservative estimates (Smith, 2005).

- Use Incremental Delivery - Break down the project into phases to reduce risk and provide value early (GAO, 2007).

- Enhance Oversight - Define performance standards with metrics for all contractors (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

- Use Rigorous Monitoring - Use earned value management, dashboards, and a consistent schedule variance review process (GAO, 2007).

- Design for Change - Allow schedule flexibility to accommodate changes that evolve (Smith, 2005).

Conclusion

The FBI's VCF project exemplifies schedule management is more than deadlines. It must balance scope, cost and quality. In disregarding time-tested scheduling practices, the FBI wasted time and money. The schedule management of future IT projects should be treated as a strategic control mechanism, not as an administrative afterthought (GAO, 2007).

References

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