tips & best practices for
EFFECTIVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT

a white paper

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PROJECT MANAGEMENT SERIES
PART 1

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A Survival Skill

In today's highly competitive workplace, the ability to deliver a project on time, within budget and in line with client expectations is critical to making customers happy and keeping their business. In fact, one could argue that an organization that fails to follow through on project delivery will have a hard time surviving in the long term.

A strong project management discipline should be a top priority for companies that wish to cut costs, reduce risks, streamline project delivery and increase overall customer satisfaction. But project management is more than just assigning deadlines, forming a task team or just buying the latest software.

> Successful project management is a synergistic approach to managing project processes from start to finish, ensuring that resources, time and money are allocated in the most efficient way possible.

Join us as we discuss practical tips and strategies for effective project management.

CHAPTER 1
Avoiding Common Pitfalls

{ According to a study by PricewaterhouseCoopers, only 2.5% of companies surveyed successfully completed 100% of their projects. }

With the proper planning and foresight, organizations can avoid many of the common pitfalls associated with managing a project. These mistakes can derail progress or even stop a project in its tracks. Awareness of potential issues that can lead to miscommunications, missed deadlines and wasted time is half the battle.

Typical Project Management Challenges

Because project management is complex and includes many variables (and people), project failure is a very real threat. Some of the biggest mistakes in managing a project include:

- ➢ Not identifying the full scope of the project
- ➢ Failure to clearly define objectives and goals
- ➢ Inability to keep the project on schedule

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➢ Confusion or misalignment with priorities
➢ Inadequate definition of team member roles
➢ Failure to maintain financial visibility
➢ Project managers are unprepared to face challenges or trials on the fly

We can't stress enough the importance of planning and preparation at the acquisition stage of a project. This, in addition to implementing the following best practices, will position your organization with the tools it needs to successfully bring a project to completion.

CHAPTER 2
Getting Started on the Right (or Left) Foot

For small- to medium-sized businesses that don't deal with a lot of bureaucratic delays and corporate protocols, it can be tempting to just dive right in, so to speak. But this approach, while satisfying in the moment, often leads to delays and stall points midway through the project.

{ Recent surveys conducted by Nielsen suggest that as much as 70% of project-related delays can be been avoided before a project begins by implementing a planning phase. }

By taking the time to prepare, you and your team will be more likely to overcome potential mid-project challenges. Consider the following:

Clearly Identify Project Scope, Goals and Objectives

Often, due to tight deadlines or other factors, there is pressure to begin executing before goals and objectives are defined; this is putting the cart before the horse. From the outset of your project, research and document the following items:

➢ Understand the client's needs and expectations.
➢ Determine the goals and objectives of the project and define what makes a "successful" completion.
➢ Clearly define what is in (and out of) scope and obtain buy-in from stakeholders and team members.

Beware of Scope Creep
Scope creep is the tendency for the scope of a project to grow larger and more ambiguous as the project progresses. A clearly defined and documented scope can help prevent this.

The more specific the goal statement and the less ambiguity about what needs to be accomplished, the better.

Brainstorm Effective Ways to Approach the Project

There are many ways to approach any given project, but they are not all equal. Does your organization have a standardized project approach in place? Consider developing a solid Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for each project category so you can ensure everyone involved in the project knows where to start and what to do next.

A Word of Caution

Just because you have an SOP in place doesn't mean it's the best approach for every project. Clearly defining the project scope, goals and objectives will help you determine if a standard approach is best or if you need to revise the approach due to special considerations (i.e., shorter timeline, budget constraints, etc.).

Set a Realistic Budget and Monitor the Budget Over Time

The key word here is "realistic." Determine your budget based on the project scope and project costs, including hourly rates as well as actual hard costs like software/hardware purchases, shipping, taxes, etc.

Remember to perform a follow-up budget analysis midway through the project to make sure spending is on track.

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CHAPTER 3
Creating Effective Teams

{ Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.
- Warren Bennis }

The Project Lead

Every project should have a dedicated project manager or project lead that serves to facilitate collaboration, address challenges and keep the project moving forward. A successful project manager will have the following skill set:

➢ Communicates well with team members
➢ Ability to assess individual strengths/weaknesses and effectively allocate resources
➢ Possesses sound organizational and project knowledge
➢ Effective problem-solving and conflict resolution skills
➢ Ability to accept feedback and learn from setbacks
➢ Understands the importance of the "people side" of project management

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Determine Individual Roles

Assigning the right people to the right tasks can make or break a project. The most effective project managers must have the ability to make smart, informed decisions when choosing a project team.

While this may sound pretty straightforward, many project managers often make the mistake of choosing members who may be highly motivated and excellent workers, but may not be best suited for this particular project. Try the following approach – and don't be afraid to document it! Many miscommunications can be avoided through communication that is documented in written format.

> ➢ First, assess the strengths and weaknesses of each team member.
> ➢ Then, delegate the right task to the right person based on domain expertise.
> ➢ Finally, clearly communicate each member's role, what they are responsible for, and your expectations.

Sometimes, the team is chosen for the project manager (based upon team member availability or previous experience with the project). In this case, it is recommended that the project manager meets one-on-one with each team member to establish a relationship before meeting as a group.

Stay Involved Throughout the Project

Before the project begins, conduct team meetings (and one-on-one meetings if necessary) to verbalize project objectives, communicate roles and identify and address potential issues. Ask team members if they have concerns or need clarification. If you are the Project Lead, be sure to let team members know you are available should any problems arise. At the end of the project, ask the group for feedback to identify any areas that need improvement next time around.

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CHAPTER 4
Encouraging Collaboration

Effective project management begins with collaboration, both online and offline. A collaborative business culture is one in which team members work together, share ideas and value active participation.

Furthermore, in a collaborative environment, team members are loyal to one another and value the ideas of others (and work better and more efficiently under stressful circumstances). When everyone is on the same page, communicating openly and regularly, and working toward the same goal, collaboration is successful.

You can encourage this kind of collaborative culture among team members in several ways:

➤ Take advantage of the many online collaboration tools that help team members easily work together and share information.

➤   At the start of the project, encourage team members to be proactive about communicating progress as well as challenges.

➤   Be accessible and approachable; institute an "open door" policy.

➤   Establish regular brainstorming meetings at different stages of the project to gather ideas and get everyone on the same page.

➤   Document successes and milestones. This is especially true for projects with long durations. Take note of regular "wins" and congratulate the team periodically on accomplishments.

Collaboration Tools

{ 96% of decision makers believe that collaboration has a big part to play in the overall success of their company.
(Halo Business Technology) }

There is an abundance of impressive collaboration tools out there, many of which are free, but that doesn't mean you should use all of them.

The tools you use should support the project's goals and objectives; for example, you may decide to use Dropbox or Google Drive to share files between team members, Passpack for sharing passwords, Conceptboard to edit and comment on visual concepts, ChatWork for instant messaging and Google Calendar for keeping track of meetings.

When choosing collaboration software, remember less is more. Consider using a handful of the most relevant collaboration software, making sure team members fully understand how to use each one before adding more.

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CHAPTER 5
Managing the Project

Of course, an essential part of project management is—you guessed it—managing the project. And while this topic can easily be a white paper all on its own, let's dive into some key concepts that can easily be overlooked but directly impact the success of a project.

Establish Priorities

Especially in the case of lengthy, complex projects with more than one deliverable, determining priorities at the very beginning will ensure team members focus on the most important tasks first. This also becomes essential when the project manager is in charge of multiple projects at once.

Take some time to map out which pieces of the project need the most attention and resources and share this information with all team members.

Define Workflow

Does the team know which elements of the project are due when? Are there some tasks that must be completed before starting on other tasks? Does the client know which deliverables they must sign off on and when to expect them? Defining the project workflow will help your organization answer those questions, stay on track and stick to the timeline.

A Gantt chart shows the start date, end date and duration of individual tasks and the entire project and can be extremely helpful for managing projects. Leveraging a project management software application (like Mavenlink, for example!) that allows you to schedule and track tasks and deliverables, both with team members and clients, will help keep the workflow clear and organized.

Project Management Software
According to a recent survey by Software Advice, 94% of participants said they relied on some kind of software to manage projects.

Communication is Key

Unfortunately, project managers often aren't informed of critical issues until the project is already delayed or over budget. This "reactive" communication occurs when team members fail to communicate progress at every stage of the project, instead waiting to make problems known until after it's too late.

Proactive communication addresses challenges as soon as they occur, so the team can discuss a solution or, if needed, revise the strategy. Weekly status reports, regular progress meetings and creation of a communications management plan are key elements of proactive communication.

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CHAPTER 6
Always Be Prepared

{ The best-laid schemes of mice and men often go awry. }

Projects, especially complex ones with multiple dependencies or variables, certainly do often go awry. The solution? Be prepared. Make a plan, and then make a back-up plan.

Risk Management

Rather than dealing with problems reactively, identify risks that may contribute to project failure and come up with a game plan to mitigate those risks. Take a look at the project scope, budget and schedule and think about what problems may arise to cause the project to exceed scope, go over budget or veer off schedule. And don't worry about making a very detailed, complex game plan. Just make one that will assist in facilitating solutions and group collaboration should you need it. It will save you a wealth of time in the long run.

Establish a contingency plan for handling those problems, along with a trigger mechanism that will automatically implement the plan, and share it with the team. Get input from team members and brainstorm all possible risk scenarios. Taking the time to address potential challenges now will save you time (and heartache) later when challenges inevitably occur.

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