

## IT Manager's Journal

Tracking the Evolution of IT

### The importance of management plans

January 09, 2007 (6:02:00 PM) - 1 year, 2 months ago

By: **Zel Nadal**

Have you ever felt there must be a better way to keep up with the tasks that overwhelm project managers as they wrangle projects to completion? Do you find yourself pulled between managing your team and their issues, managing your sponsors, and keeping up with communications? The hectic pace may just be part of the nature of managing the unknown, but here is one approach that may make your pace more tolerable.

Have you ever felt there must be a better way to keep up with the tasks that overwhelm project managers as they wrangle projects to completion? Do you find yourself pulled between managing your team and their issues, managing your sponsors, and keeping up with communications? The hectic pace may just be part of the nature of managing the unknown, but here is one approach that may make your pace more tolerable.

Many projects follow a bell-shaped curve, with fewer resources involved in the initial phases of the project. As you add resources, cost and effort rise during execution, with effort eventually dwindling to nothing as projects close.

A project manager's efforts don't follow the same curve. His efforts remain high throughout the project. During the early phases the project manager is busy planning, but is able to keep up with the workload. As the project moves into the execution and monitoring phases, the project manager is often overwhelmed with managing scope, time, cost, quality, status reports, management, resource conflicts, and more. As the project moves into closure, a fortunate project manager may see some relief.

This cycle is predictable and possibly avoidable by moving project planning tasks from the execution phase to the planning phase. I realize you're eager to get your team started, and I am sure you feel the sooner they start, the better the chances of completing on time. This tactic is deceiving, and leads to burning unproductive man hours.

Many years ago I saw this mistake firsthand, when I helped build Gateway.com, with Anderson Consulting and a handful of Gateway staff. I was a Visual Basic consultant taking direction from the Anderson project manager at Gateway's facility in La Jolla, Calif. Anderson had been too eager to get us started, and the first week many of us were without a PC, phone, or even desk. I found it ironic that Gateway couldn't ship me a PC at the drop of a hat. The second week they sent us home while Anderson regrouped. The third week, when they called us back, it was obvious they had planned for our arrival with team leaders in place, PCs, desks and phones, email, source control, and databases. Staff is costly, and preparing the playing field for your team allows them to focus on their specialty cost effectively.

Once you begin the actual work, you start the juggling act. If you have reduced your scheduled tasks down to executing your management plans, including updating the project plan, status meetings, and status reports, you will have the time to address the issues you neglected to plan for and those you could never have predicted. Fortunately, the number of unknowns dwindles during monitoring and closure, allowing you to focus on duties such as project and contract closure.

You should have the following tasks from *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, Third Edition* (PMBOK) completed before the execution phase:

1. Develop project charter
2. Preliminary project scope statement
3. Project management plan
  - Project scope management plan
  - Schedule management plan
  - Cost management plan
  - Quality management plan
  - Process improvement plan
  - Staffing management plan
  - Communication management plan
  - Risk management plan
  - Procurement management plan
  - Milestone list
  - Resource calendar
  - Schedule baseline
  - Cost baseline
  - Quality baseline
  - Risk register

It's a daunting list, but not insurmountable. The article **How standards and a database can improve your project management** describes how the use of templates can allow you to start plans in minutes that would normally take hours. The article encourages you to keep everything in a database, but you can start with document templates if you don't have time to create a database at this point. The USDA has basic **examples** of management plans, as does **Government Rural Outreach**.

Some of your management plans require expert advice from your team, without which you may find yourself unable to complete the documents. Complete what you can and fill in the gaps when reviewing the plans with your team, once they start. You will find your team will have insightful additions to many of these plans.

Suppress the urge to forgo any of these documents. You will inevitably address many of the questions these documents answer, regardless of whether you formally include these deliverables in your projects. You're better off creating them sooner than later. Larger projects easily justify the effort. Shorter projects may require so few resources they don't require such formality, yet even the smallest projects benefit from a management standard. That became clear to me when my manager asked me to enlist an hourly consultant to upgrade one of our server applications. The scope was narrow, and I received a quote from the consultant for \$100 per hour for a software upgrade that would take three hours. I passed the information to my manager, who approved the cost. Before the upgrade, my manager approached me three separate times with additional functionality that would double the scope. Having received approval for \$300, he insisted on including the additional functionality without additional cost. Clearly, the consultant was hourly, but grounding my manager was difficult. He eventually conceded to the original scope rather than incurring additional cost. If I had at least one documented sentence stating the project scope and the scope management plan, I would have had a much easier time managing the scope. I now use simple management plan templates for short projects and all-inclusive plan templates for lengthy projects.

As you create these plans, focus on the details. For example, the project scope management plan describes how the team will define the project scope, develop the detailed project scope statement, develop the work breakdown structure, verify the project scope, and control the project scope. This plan should specifically name who will document change requests, who is on the change control committee, how often they will meet, and any other questions you can answer before the execution phase begins.

After methodically reviewing your management plans, focus your attention on implementing your plans to manage scope, time, cost, quality, processes, your team, status reports and other communications, milestones, and risks to the project. You are the project expert on holding stakeholders to these plans. From sponsors to developers, everyone will need guidance on following the projects management plans. Those who have the most invested in your project can be its worst enemies.

Guide stakeholders through your change control process and hold them to your management plans. If you are able to hold them to the plans, you may actually deliver a quality product on time. If not, you will inevitably take the blame as the project manager.

*Zel Nadal, PMP, is an IT project manager with Hilliard City Schools in Hilliard, Ohio. He has developed enterprise applications since 1994 for companies such as American Express, GTE, Microsoft, Gateway, and Eckerd. Since 1998 he has managed information technology projects for companies such as Geico, BASF, and Ohio Department of Health.*

Read more at: <http://www.itmanagersjournal.com/feature/21705>