Avoiding Project Failure: It's Not Rocket Science

~ By Duncan Haughey

It's said that every project is unique; however, the underlying causes of project failure are usually the same. When you know what these causes are, you can minimise the chances of problems and increase your likelihood of success.

Projects go wrong for the same reasons all the time. There are no new sins. We can look at a project in its first two months and know if it will be a success or not.
— Nick Dean, Managing Director at Professional Values

What should you do when faced with poor initiation, weak control, lack of staffing, risks, issues and unrealistic expectations?

The following are five common problem areas and possible solutions.

1. Poor Project Initiation

The Problem
Possibly the most common pitfall is failing to initiate a project properly by spending the time to gather and agree to customer requirements, create a good project plan and set customer expectations.

It's tempting to start work quickly, but a poor initiation stage often leads to problems and even failure.

The Solution
Don’t start the project until it has been properly initiated. Don’t allow the customer to push you into starting work on the assumption that it will result in an earlier delivery. The reality is that a poor initiation extends projects by causing rework, errors and oversights. It's best to say no when pushed and never start the build phase too early.

2. Weak Project Control

The Problem
If you don't manage a project effectively to its conclusion, it's pointless to do a thorough job of planning and initiating it in the first place. Typical problems from weak project control include scope creep, poor work-planning, lack of change control, poor communication and poor management of risks and issues.
The Solution

To gain and maintain control of your project, you must take the following actions:

- Introduce a change control process and make your team and customer aware of it. Use it to ensure your team stay focused on delivering what is important.
- Practice exception reporting. This saves time and makes sure there is better focus on risks and issues as they arise.
- Communicate progress regularly with your customer, sponsor, team members and other relevant stakeholders.
- Review and update your project plan regularly to check whether the project is on track and performing as expected. These checks enable you to take corrective action early if the project is deviating from the plan. If you don't intend to review and update your plan, then it's not worth creating.

3. Lack of Staffing and Skills

The Problem

Not having the right number of people or having the right number with the wrong skill mix is often the cause of project failure. It's frustrating when your project lacks the right number of skilled people, which is all too common today.

The Solution

Always insist that management provide you with people who have the right skills, whether they are internal or contract staff. Back up your request with a solid project plan that shows the areas where people are needed. Never keep quiet and struggle on as it's not fair to you or your team.

4. Failing to Address Risks and Issues

The Problem

There are many occasions during the project life cycle when risks and issues may cause problems, even failures. Examples of these include:

- Failure to define the requirements clearly, resulting in not meeting customer expectations.
- Cutting-edge or new technology that causes unforeseen problems.
- Poor technical design, preventing changes or scaling of the solution in the future.
- Poor change control, allowing change requests to cause the project to drift.
- Changing business priorities, diverting attention away from core work.
- Inadequate testing, leading to bugs and errors left in the product.
- Loss of key people at critical times.

The Solution

Review a list of risks and issues at the start of every project. A good approach is to brainstorm possible risks and issues with your team or other project managers who have run similar projects. Continue to check risks and issues with your team throughout the project. Solutions for the aforementioned examples include:
Employ a business analyst to draw out the customers' requirements and document them in a clear and concise way.

Ask if it's necessary to use cutting-edge technology, or whether a more proven solution will deliver the same benefits.

Use your team to create a technical design as it gives you a far greater chance of something robust and scalable, with the bonus that your team has a stake in making it succeed.

Agree to a change control process with your customer before the project starts and stick to it.

Create a weekly work-plan for the team so that they stay focused on the priorities and aren't distracted.

Put a test plan together with test scenarios based on the customer requirements, and ensure there is enough resource and customer commitment to run them.

Create a contingency plan covering loss of key people.

5. Failing to Manage Expectations

The Problem

Projects often start on a high with an enormous amount of optimism. During the project life cycle, expectations can inflate to a degree well beyond what is possible. When customers don't know what to expect or don't have progress visibility, frustration can set in and may break down your relationship with them.

The Solution

It's a project manager's role to manage expectations to a sensible level. One way to do this is to break down projects into smaller chunks or phases with frequent milestones. Doing so will allow you to manage expectations by making regular deliveries so that customers see what they're getting. This approach ensures the project delivers to the customers' expectations by giving them early visibility of what you're building.

Finally

Unilog, the independent pan-European IT consultancy and services company, did research in April 2003 that found 100 percent of IT managers had experienced projects that failed to meet all of their objectives. They identified the following deadly sins that lead to project failure:

- Poor project scoping and undefined project objectives, roles and responsibilities lead to unrealistic expectations.
- Lack of communication between IT and business results in a mismatch of requirements and expectations.
- Absence of both senior business sponsor and project manager.
- Technology prioritised over people: No or minimal involvement of key users during the scoping phase and lack of regular communication with them throughout the project implementation.
- Lack of project success metrics.
- Absence of risk assessment or contingency plan.
- Lack of regular checks to ensure the project is on track based on time and budget.
Although projects are unique in nature, the underlying causes of project failure are usually the same. Five of the most common problems are poor initiation, weak control, lack of staffing, not addressing risks and issues and unrealistic expectations. To increase your chances of success:

- Avoid being push into starting the build and implementation phases until the project has been properly initiated.
- Actively monitor and control your project through to its conclusion.
- Insist you have the right number of people and correct skill mix on your project.
- Check risks and issues regularly with your team and take steps to resolve issues and minimise risks.
- Manage the expectations of your customer by giving them early visibility of what you’re building.

Don’t become the casualty of a failed project. Always put measures in place that address the five key areas to help secure your project success. After all, it’s not rocket science.

©Project Smart. All rights reserved ~ www.projectsmart.co.uk