

Getting troubled projects back on track.



Have you ever been part of an IT project that started with high hopes and fanfare, but ended up behind schedule, over budget, and ultimately in trouble?

This scenario might sound like a professional nightmare, but for many IT project managers it has at some point been an unwelcome and dreaded reality. In fact, according to a 2007 Dynamic Markets Limited study for Computing Technology Industry Association, 62 percent of all organizations indicated they had IT projects fail to meet their schedules, with 41 percent saying the projects did not provide the promised benefits to the business and almost half finding unexpectedly high maintenance costs. The story these findings tell is clear — keeping IT projects on track is a challenge for even the most experienced project managers. But when things go wrong there are some clear steps you can take, in a timely way, to identify the problem, analyze the causes and get back on track.

Avoiding common pitfalls.

Let's say you're given the responsibility of building a new web-based consolidated reporting tool for your entire organization's finance function. As the IT project manager, you're brought in to ensure you have all the right resources in place — from IT infrastructure to application delivery to properly trained IT staff who can take the project from build to testing to implementation. You have three months until the actual go-live

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date and a fixed amount of financial resources. Project plans, task owners and timelines have all been reviewed countless times and approved by your peers and senior IT executives as well as the business line end-users. All systems are "go" with no roadblocks immediately evident.

Now, fast forward two months — you've not yet reached the testing phase and you've overspent by 50 percent. The business unit is not happy and your resources are dwindling. Questions will be coming at you from all directions: "How did we get here?" "Why didn't we know this would happen sooner?" "Shouldn't we have anticipated this earlier?" To avoid these questions before they ever get thrown your way, read on for some practical and easy ways to avoid IT project pitfalls before their onset.

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- **Define the requirements.**

It is important to verify both the business and technical requirements before starting. Gaining agreement from the business stakeholder is crucial. The stakeholder must agree that what you are planning to do is really what they want. Without clearly defining the requirements, you have little chance of success.

- **Know the scope.**

Sometimes projects get in trouble because people have different assumptions and expectations that surface late in the project, resulting in questions, problems and dissatisfaction. It is essential that everyone involved with the project knows, understands, and agrees to the scope of the project. Project scope should be documented to provide future reference in the event of problems — never assume that everyone understands the scope. It is also important to define what is not in scope.

- **Be realistic.**

Have you ever been asked “How soon can we have this up and running?” As an IT project manager, probably more often than not. When it comes to IT projects, which will typically make your end-users’ work-life easier, more efficient and less stressful, they want to see the finished product before you’ve even started. Despite these pressures, only IT practitioners truly know how complex and involved a particular project will be and therefore how much time and money it may take. With that in mind, being honest and realistic from your first meeting is imperative in order for appropriate expectations to be set and managed.

- **Give yourself some padding.**

When building project timelines and budgets, be sure to allow you and your team some wiggle room. Projects are rarely what they seem and there is a long list of potential challenges that could arise — system issues could come into play, application development could take longer and be more complex than anticipated, there could be system outages during your build or implementation, etc. Be mindful of these and allow yourself a little more time and money than you think will be needed to help buffer these unexpected incidents beforehand. It’s better to be under budget and beat your due date than to end up in the opposite predicament.

- **Set well-defined goals and KPIs.**

Before jumping into a new project, be sure to create a working timeline containing key performance indicators (KPIs) that will allow your project team to know when you’re on or off schedule as the project progresses. These should be regularly checked and strictly monitored. For example, if you’ve been tasked with building a new set of firewalls for your organization and have two weeks to get them up and running, the start of week two should clearly be dedicated to testing. If you’re not there by that pre-set date, it’s time to reassess the resources on the project and adjust the schedule. If you hadn’t already set these goals, you may not intervene and make adjustments as quickly — wasting more time and money in the process.

- **Prepare for change.**

Things will constantly change as the project moves forward, so it’s important to clearly state how you plan to deal with change. Before the project starts, document change procedures and make sure everyone understands how change will be handled.

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Identifying problems.

Over the span of a career, chances are good that an IT professional will have to deal with projects that hit the skids in one way or another: in terms of budget, timeliness, or payoff for the business. Unfortunately, these results are more what the industry has come to expect, which means that corporations have more to learn when it comes to effectively controlling technology projects. Part of the issue is being able to quickly and efficiently identify problems as soon as they come about. To move things in the right direction, you need to know when things go wrong, and that means regularly following the progress of projects. But making the right measurements is critical.

Metrics must start with hard data, not subjective estimates of progress. Any substantive project will have multiple parts and phases, with clear criteria of what each needs to be finished. When the CIO or business unit leader looks at the status, it must be in terms of what was actually completed, not “gut feel.” The more concretely you can view where things are, the more realistically you can anticipate when something is behind schedule. Using specialized project management systems can help give all the necessary stakeholders a view into how projects are progressing and offer early warning signs.

Just as important as tracking objective progress is knowing and articulating the business value expected for the project with a relative ranking of importance within the organization’s total IT project pipeline. This ranking is not something that can be done in isolation. Between knowing the business value and the actual progress, IT management can determine not only when a project is starting to slip, but how important its success is to the company. When resources

are limited — and they usually are — management can look at multiple projects that are slipping and have a sense of what to rescue first. By being coordinated from project to project within your organization, management also resolves another major cause of failure — conflicts among projects.

From problem to solution.

Once you’ve identified an IT project that is going off course and needs special attention, it’s time for you and your team to roll up your sleeves and get back to the mission at hand. Here are the top five ways to get your next troubled IT project back on track:

1. Immediately stop pointing fingers.

The blame game is not going to solve any problems. Whether it’s a business issue or an IT blunder, no matter which group was the cause of the problem, everyone needs to work together in order to come to a solution. Figuring out exactly where things went wrong will be an important part of the lessons learned and debrief. But, in order to get things back on track quickly, it’s important to come together and focus on solving the problem vs. placing blame.

2. Go back to basics.

This is where you determine whether the original scope and intent of the project is still intact, or if people in IT or other departments may have expanded the scope of a project. When the project expands beyond the initial concept, you should bring all the stakeholders together and renegotiate schedules and budgets. Ask if it is necessary to include everything that has been added, or would it make more sense to get a first version of the software up and running and plan an additional project to expand its features and scope as necessary?

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3. Communicate openly and frequently.

While you're troubleshooting, the need for regular communication between IT and the business line will increase. Make sure to be completely open and honest with them about the situation because you'll need their understanding and buy-in before your developers, coders and testers can get back to work effectively. The more informed you are of what's happening in each other's worlds, the more connected and linked in you'll be, yielding a much stronger final project. Also, hold regular status calls for the project team. When things go awry, there will be a need for more touch points and check-ins until the project returns to business as usual.

4. Bring in the right expertise.

IT skills are not easy to come by. Being an expert in application development, coding or systems/connectivity troubleshooting is a true niche skill set. When problems come up, sometimes your project may require level-two support — very experienced and skilled IT professionals who you may not need day-to-day, but can act as consultants as needed to get you out of troubled territory. Be sure to build a bench of such consultants that you can call on as needed to come in and quickly act as an IT mechanic for whatever problem you may be facing.

5. Re-check and re-allocate your resources.

Do you realistically have enough money to get this project started again and completed correctly? Do you have enough project managers, developers, consultants, etc.? Do you need to bring in temporary help or an outside project team to get this done right? Is your internal infrastructure really up to par and able to handle this project? While all of these questions should have been asked and answered at the onset, when problems arise, you need to ask all of these questions again — and this time answer them based on what you've learned and seen to date with this particular assignment. Re-answer these questions as you look to solve your IT project problems — only if you answer these correctly can you get the project moving in the right direction again.

The job of a project manager is filled with difficulties. However, you can alleviate the stress on you, your team and your organization by setting clear goals and expectations from the outset, quickly identifying problems, analyzing the causes, communicating effectively, and developing immediate solutions. And when you're able to effectively keep projects on track, you keep yourself on a course for success.

To learn more about successfully managing all kinds of IT projects, or if you need staff augmentation services for a particular project, contact your local Ajilon Consulting branch today.

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