

## **Planning Your Projects to Succeed**

What makes a project successful? Articles may differ on the specific components, but all agree that the Project Planning phase is undeniably the most critical phase of any project. The success or failure of a project depends solely on how well this phase is managed.

In today's workplace resources find themselves with a challenging workload. Everyone is stretched to their max capacity. Upper management wants to see immediate progress on projects in hopes of reaping the projected financial gain sooner than later. In an effort to provide tangible output for money being spent, an organization lacking project management methodologies will often neglect the planning phases and aggressively move into the design or building phase. The potential risk of neglecting this phase leads to projects running longer than scheduled and over budget.

It is the responsibility of the PMO to articulate the impact of this phase so that the organization understands its direct effect on the bottom line. With proper understanding of the impact of planning, the executive team and project sponsors can ensure that the project is provided the correct amount of time to thoroughly conduct this phase. A good plan always offers enough time for every phase in the project life cycle. Below are a few components that are often times undervalued during the planning phase.

- **Document Business Requirements** – When the planning phase is neglected business requirements are often verbally discussed and approved. This is arguably the first cardinal sin in this phase. Business requirements must be written, analyzed, and agreed upon in writing. This is the first point in the project when details are determined. Missing components in this phase will directly impact development, designs and timeframes, costs, testing plans, training plans, and resource estimates. In order to avoid this costly mistake the project team must be provided enough time to conduct requirements gathering. Once the requirements documentation is created, it must be routed for approval. All project sponsors, team members, and customers must review, agree upon, and approve the requirements are accurate and exhaustive.
- **Creation of a communication plan** – There are only a few things you can count on in life: Taxes, death, and change. No matter how thorough the requirements gathering phase is, a project will have change that needs to be managed. A clearly defined communication plan provides the protocol necessary to address changes and project issues with immediacy and efficiency. It allows the team to move as a unit with the individual members already knowledgeable, based on the plan, of what they can expect from the project manager and what is expected of them in return. The efficient handling of change will minimize its overall impact on the project.
- **Establish a Resource Plan** – A project is only as strong as the members of the team. The resource plan will help identify the skill level required and the amount of work expected from each member. It is important that this step not be overlooked as it will immediately impact the defined timelines as well as the overall product quality. If there is a skill level discrepancy this can be mitigated at the beginning of the project with less impact than dealing with the fallout in later phases. Clearly defining how much time will be required from a resource up front will reduce the risk of finding out

that the resource will become over extended or unavailable during the course of the project. Adjusting resources in the middle of the project will directly impact project timelines.

Cost of change in a project exponentially increases the further along the life of the project. Proper planning not only will minimize large changes within the project, but may also be the mechanism to determine that an initiative is not necessarily ready to be undertaken or possibly not the right timing. Clear business requirements, clear communications protocols and a clear resource plan will aid in determining proper scope, proper understanding and proper needed and available resources to successfully complete the project – proper planning.