

Why Projects Fail and How to Stop It

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There are many different articles that talk about why projects fail, so why is this one going to be different? This is not only going to give you the five major reasons why projects fail, but is also going to touch on how to avoid these failures or how to correct them once they creep into your project.

Poor Leadership

Based on my experience, this is the biggest reason why projects fail. Poor leadership can manifest itself in many ways: an unsupportive project sponsor or executive; a weak project manager; or a company that has not bought into the benefits of the project. Project sponsors and executives must be supportive of the project no matter what the situation is. People take their cues from their leaders, and if the sponsors are not 100% behind the project, then staff cannot be expected to give it their all. Ensure that the right PM is on the job. Do not just look for someone with PM experience or credentials. Interview candidates and find the one that best meets the needs of the project; someone who can manage the team as well as the sponsors. Leaders must also communicate the benefits of the project so that people can understand what it means to them. This will alleviate the risk of the project not being supported by the organization as a whole.

Poor Communication

Poor communication can be considered the ugly cousin of poor leadership because the two usually go hand in hand. Many projects spend a lot of time developing the communication plan at the beginning of the project, but never execute it. It is usually done so that the task can be ticked off as completed. The key to effective communication is having a plan that identifies what needs to be communicated to whom, how often and by what means. The communication plan should be diligently executed and updated as the needs of the different stakeholder groups change. Executives and sponsors also need to be singing the benefits of the project or initiative, and the praises of the project team from the rooftops, in order to gain and maintain support.

Poor Scope Definition

Having poor scope definition can lead to projects being delayed, going on longer than expected and costing more than budgeted. All because the organization did not spend enough time defining what was required. There are always going to be hiccups within a project, but organizations need to better focus on what the requirements are and not get bogged down on what some "nice to haves" would be. Get a representative group of experts and naysayers in a room and identify what is the desired outcome of the project and the requirements to achieve that desired outcome. Any activity moving forward that is not directly related to achieving the desired outcome should be added to a list for future enhancement or improvement.

Poor User Involvement

Too many projects and initiatives have a very small group of people who make most of the decisions without taking into consideration other areas of the business. I am not a proponent of getting representation from every different department or office, but reasonable user involvement is appropriate. Without it, good luck in getting the project implemented successfully! Ensure that you have selected users from both large and small divisions of the organizations, and ensure that you have selected some dissenters to be a part of the group developing policies, processes and the direction of the project. Once involved, dissenters can be very quickly turned into your largest supporters. In the case where the dissenter continues their lack of support, even after being involved in crafting the direction of the project, find out why, and if it is irreconcilable, remove them from the project team (and possibly the organization).

Poor Risk Management

Not enough organizations spend time on risk planning and management. Like communication planning, many organizations put together an original risk plan so that it can be checked off the task list, but they never review it again. Projects should have weekly risk management meetings (or less frequent depending on the duration of the project) to manage the risks already identified and discuss any new risks that may arise. Risk planning should include identifying potential risks to the project, both positive and negative, what the impact of the risk would be, what is the likelihood of the risk becoming an issue, what would be the risk mitigation strategy and who is responsible. Once a risk actually happens, it becomes an issue that needs to be tracked through the issue resolution process.

As you can see, there are some easy ways to avoid some of the biggest project pitfalls. If you can reduce the impact of these five items on your projects, then you will see a remarkable improvement in the success and completion of your projects. They will also be more manageable because you will be taking proactive steps to avoid issues instead of having to react to them after it may be too late.

For further articles on these items that are more targeted towards project sponsors and Executives, see my website (www.acmconsulting.ca/resources).