Significantly Improving Your Project Success Rate

Introduction

Organizations have technical projects for designing new products or making business process improvements on their agendas. For many, the successful completion of these projects is elusive. Several recent studies such as by KPMG, cite the failure rate for technical projects at between 30-50 percent.

According to the results of a web poll released by the Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) in 2007, poor communications is the top factor that causes a project to fail.

Project communications can be improved but this alone will not substantially improve your project success rate. There are other project management practices that if consistently applied, will greatly improve project success. These practices are not new but many project managers fail to use them regularly.

Steps to Take to Improve Project Success

Through our years of experience with a variety of projects, IMS has adopted a few fundamental practices that we have found to be critical to successful project completion. We utilize these practices with every project with excellent results.

- *Communicate with all project team members and stakeholders regularly.*
  Such communications, perhaps via a high-level weekly report, should include project status and a view of progress to date. It is too easy for team members to lose track of how their deliverable fits into the overall project, lowering their motivation and commitment to project success. Suppliment this with one to one stakeholder communication as appropriate. Be proactive!

- *Conduct exhaustive requirements gathering and analysis.*
  Our experience shows that a continual effort must be made to clarify and validate user requirements and bridge the gap between the users and the developers. For example, a new system for one of our customer's required specialized audio capability. The users specified that the audio quality had to be "good" which was too subjective for the design engineers. Our project manager spent extra time with the users and engineers to develop a method to quantify "good".

- *Increase emphasis on the project schedule development phase.*
  Meetings should take place to iterate and finalize the product development schedule. At a minimum, the project manager must include functional department heads in the meetings and stress open, honest communication.

Ideally, all department members with project tasks should also attend. Their involvement enhances development of a more accurate and realistic project schedule.

- *Standardize the format of action item tracking and status reporting.*
  Many organizations handle multiple projects simultaneously. Adopting an efficient standardized format for action item tracking and status reporting reduces time spent by team members trying to stay abreast of the multiple projects in which they are involved.

  IMS has found that many organizations allow their project managers to use their own templates for action item tracking and status reporting rather than requiring a standard format, causing team members to waste time tracking efforts on multiple projects.

- *Publish and adhere to a consistent project status meeting schedule.*
  Doing so generates a stronger sense among team members that the project is being well controlled and managed. This includes keeping to the appointed schedule including starting and ending on time. Team members, especially newer ones will develop a stronger belief that their time and talents are being respected thereby increasing their motivation to completing their project commitments as planned.

  One of our defense industry customers traditionally holds 30 minute project status meetings each morning where attendance by all key project team members is mandatory. Each meeting starts and ends on time. The goal is to synchronize the project schedule, communicate problems that have occurred, and collaborate with all team members to determine solutions to each problem. This practice is very effective to keep high dollar, complex projects on track. Moreover, these meetings are critical to help identify overlaps or conflicts when multiple groups plan to use the same resources simultaneously.

- *Practice "agile" project management to effectively deal with unplanned project issues.*
  In our experience, projects never go quite as planned; unexpected issues or contingencies crop up. Expect to make adjustments along the way and concentrate on completing short-term tasks and deliverables. If issues arise that all team members agree will have a meaningful impact on the schedule, bring these issues quickly to the customer for schedule adjustment. Rarely can additional resources be brought to bear to maintain the original schedule.

  Moreover, be mindful of what's coming up further on in the project but don't waste time and resources dealing with future issues as conditions may change before you get there.

Personality traits of the project manager are an often overlooked critical success factor in our experience. In addition to having a high level of competence and experience successfully managing technical projects, a project manager needs to be a strong communicator with excellent people skills. They need to clearly articulate the responsibilities and deliverables to each team member as well as succinctly communicate with executives. Project team members are smart, capable people who know their worth and won't thank project managers for leading them. Project managers must deal successfully with such people daily. Therefore they must be simultaneously patient and persistent to complete the project as planned. The best project managers achieve the desired results while creating a favorable impression of all team members, many of whom are likely to be involved in future projects.

Summary

Frequent, clear and concise communications are critical for project success and in our experience, there's no such thing as too much project-related communication. Communications coupled with the adherence of a few fundamental practices, such as rigorous schedule development, standardized project reporting, and flexibility for dealing with inevitable unexpected project issues will greatly enhance your project success rate. The best project managers are competent and experienced and also possess strong communications and people skills.

About Integrated Management SOLUTIONS, Inc.

Integrated Management SOLUTIONS, Inc. (IMS) specializes in project and program management, systems test and evaluation, and technical documentation and custom training services.

Formed in 1997, IMS is composed of senior-level professionals who are focused on the implementation and life cycle management of mission-critical systems. Our team members have developed substantial expertise from experiences delivering services to a diverse base of customers as well as from previous commercial and government agency employers.

IMS screens and hires experienced people who possess strong communications and people skills. Such capabilities combined with proven practices yield high quality results on-time and on-budget.

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