

Six Best Practices for Managing Large-Scale IT Projects

Whether relocating a data center that serves thousands of users around the globe or upgrading a regional hospital center's network to the latest operating system, IT projects require near failure-proof project management practices. Even though it might not seem that way, IT projects, like all projects, have a defined beginning and end. It's in between these two points that numerous challenges, issues, risks and concerns arise: Will the project sponsor look to increase the scope of the project as individual milestones are met? Will the project team collaborate well and communicate effectively? Will unanticipated delays interrupt the work schedule? Will the budget be depleted midway through implementation?

Project managers and their teams must operate despite a backdrop of risk and uncertainty. The larger, the more complex, and the more mission-critical the project, the more crucial it is that the team has in place an effective set of tools to ensure on-time, within budget delivery. By putting some well-documented best practices to work, there's a good chance that many of the common pitfalls of managing complex IT projects can be sidestepped, and the project will have a successful outcome.

1. Eliminate Surprises: Plan the Work and Work the Plan

The first step in managing a complex IT project is to ensure that a comprehensive discovery/analysis session takes place between the client project sponsor and the project team. This pre-implementation phase provides the sponsor an opportunity to outline the project's objectives, requirements and desired results and enables the project team to supply in response a detailed statement of work. The statement of work should be free of any ambiguity and clearly describe each phase of the project — its time horizon, staffing requirements, cost, and terms and conditions. Then and only then should implementation begin.

While there's a strong tendency for project managers to shortchange the planning process and dive head first into a project, this is a certain recipe for disaster. By mapping out all aspects of the project in advance, surprises can be avoided. Surprises are never good in the world of project management. Planning, planning, and more planning is the only way to avoid them.

2. Communicate to Everyone Always

More meetings, more memos, more reports, more emails — more mess? Not at all, given the uncertainty of managing large-scale, multi-phase projects. Project teams need buy-in

every step of the way. Communication will naturally happen on an ad-hoc basis, but when more planned communication takes place, it is better for the project team and stakeholders alike. Formal meetings should be conducted with project team members on a regular basis to plan upcoming work, discuss and resolve open issues and keep the project moving forward. Regular meetings should also be conducted with the project sponsor and other stakeholders to update them on the project status and discuss relevant issues. This will ensure ongoing stakeholder confidence and satisfaction, and prevent important details from falling through the cracks.

"The overall project plan should include discrete plans for managing the scope, schedule, budget, quality, personnel, risk, communications, procurement and perhaps most importantly, stakeholder expectations."

3. Use Client Tools Whenever Possible

Project managers have an arsenal of tools to measure the success of their activities. This includes checklists, software systems, statistical formulas, reporting formats, metrics, analytics and much more. It's important to present updates, progress reports, change orders and various metrics and analytics using tools, techniques, and systems the project sponsor/client is comfortable with and uses regularly. If stakeholders use a particular software system to measure progress, or log in and track issues, deploy the client's systems and processes to move forward in lieu of those you prefer to use.



4. Pilot-Test Your Solution Prior to Full-Scale Deployment

Before implementing any solution across-the-board, proof-of-concept testing is vital in helping ensure a successful result. For instance, by sampling a small percentage of desktops and laptops that have been upgraded with a new security system you'll be able to determine whether the chosen security system will integrate with other enterprise applications and the entire system configuration before it is rolled out to all 20,000 users. Proof-of-concept testing is an essential part of project management. It allows you to throw away your assumptions and confirm whether your chosen implementation path will work well in the specific production

environment prior to roll-out. The closer the pilot project can be configured to the actual system design, the more reliable the results will be for assessing the effectiveness of full-scale enterprise deployment.

5. Avoid Ad-Hoc Decision-Making

Despite the best-laid plans a project manager may have in place, all projects have ongoing issues that require immediate resolution. Some are accounted for in the Risk Management Plan including personnel shortages, budget over runs and procurement delays but others like inclement weather, natural disasters are unforeseen and may not be accounted for. Both planned and unplanned issues can throw a project off its critical path. Having a well-documented escalation path in place along with a contingency plan that can be deployed at a moment's notice can help keep the project chugging along. Both plans should be documented with the specifics spelled out in detail.

6. Document What You Have Learned from Every Project and Every Project Phase

If you're thinking once the project has come to a close it's time to kick back and celebrate, you should hold that thought and reconsider. Celebrating is all well and good, however, the final step in project management involves documenting everything – the good, the bad and the ugly. There are few places other than in the world of project management where the saying "Those who don't remember the past are doomed to repeat it," holds more true. The savviest of project managers knows that he/she is also a historian and an archivist. While it's common place in the business world to focus on mistakes, successes should also be chronicled and shared with team members, management, and project sponsors. The place to record all of this is in a Library of "Lessons Learned." This library becomes part of the company's organizational process assets for all team members to learn from and reference in the future.

By adhering to these six best project management practices, you can avoid costly mistakes and help ensure the success of your next IT infrastructure project.

Ready to start your next IT Project? We'd love the opportunity to be of service. We're ready to develop the ideal project service plan for you. Contact Maintech today.

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