Managing Your Three-Ring Circus
- David Raths
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THE PROJECT manager has never been a highly touted position in information technology. One reason might be that it requires far more discipline than creativity, much like being a drill sergeant in the armed forces. Also, it can be detrimental to your career if you're the manager of a project that fails -- and many do.

The Standish Group, which researches IT project management, reports that only 26 percent of corporate IT projects in 1998 were successful -- completed on time, on budget, and with all the features originally specified. That number was a big improvement over the 16 percent success rate in 1994.

These figures may seem depressing, but Standish reports there are several signs that IT is getting better at projects and the role of the IT project manager is winning newfound respect, especially since corporate executives gained an appreciation for their importance during Y2K initiatives. We asked some IT project managers and consultants to offer their solutions for keeping IT projects on track.

1. Get users involved from the start.

It has almost become a cliché to say you have to have a business "champion" for your project to succeed. But as important as an executive's backing may be, so is the involvement of end-users, says David King, director of architecture and strategy at Enterprise Systems Consulting in Irvine, Calif.

IT staffers don't see business in the same way as users and line managers, King says. "Left to their own devices, IT people will create the best technical system, but perhaps not the best system from a business standpoint." When he's called into a company to fix a project that's gone off the rails, often his audit trail leads to the fact that they didn't have users on the project team, King says. In fact, there's been a push in the corporate setting to have a business manager be the project leader, rather than an IT person. "There has been some resistance to this notion on the IT side in the past, but that's changing for the better," King says.

2. Choose your project team carefully.

OK, so it's important to include users in project design. But what kind of users should you be looking for?

"We asked for people who could be empowered to make decisions on process and design for their respective departments," says Leslie Geukers, who -- along with fellow IS staffers at London Health Sciences Centre, a major

teaching hospital in London, Ontario -- has been working for two years on the implementation of an integrated clinical information system. Sometimes this meant that a middle management person was freed up for the project, she adds. Sometimes line staff were given the authority to make these decisions. "We looked for good communicators with an interest in technology -- people who really understood the way information flowed through their department, people who were the informal leaders in their areas."

3. Keep project information in one place.

With all the shared-media products available today, there's really no excuse not to have a central repository for all the data and "to-do" items attached to a project. "To some people, this sounds expensive," says Kyle Moran, an IT project management consultant at Project Enterprises, in Chaska, Minn., "but it can be as simple as a server directory where people can find meeting notes and an Access database containing all the different open issues of the project. It's especially important for geographically dispersed teams."

4. Meetings, meetings, meetings!

Although meetings can become tedious, they are essential to keeping everyone on the same page as well as to build team spirit. Consultants suggest you keep the meetings upbeat -- they shouldn't be finger-pointing sessions. It's also important to meet regularly with upper management on important projects.

At American Honda in Torrance, Calif., Y2K project manager Jim Dinneen created project status reports for three separate monthly steering committee meetings: one of high-level executives, one of mid-level business managers, and an IS steering committee.

"The executives have a basic feel for what's going on, but are not interested in the details. But the corporate managers asked a lot of good questions, which helped resolve issues before they became real problems," Dinneen says.

On the London Health Sciences Centre laboratory project, which involved three campuses and several hundred users, Geukers' project team met weekly with the vice president and management to ensure timely decisions. As the live date approached, they had daily half-hour meetings with the project team and reviewed a detailed to-do list. "I think this was a critical step in ensuring we went live on time," she says.

Moran says it's also a good idea to have regular meetings with other project managers to share ideas about tracking issues and resolving problems.

5. Earn the Nobel Prize for diplomacy.

Project managers must understand the pressures felt by both business-side and IT people and help bridge the gap, says Kevin Kantola, IT project manager at Health Partners Inc., an HMO based in Minneapolis.

"The businesspeople tend to keep their heads down and push to get things done. The IT people are more methodical and analytical," Kantola says. "You have to negotiate between the two and help each understand the risks and pressures the others face."

American Honda's Dinneen says his three-year-long Y2K project was challenging at times because networking staffers, for instance, were handed Y2K chores on top of their already busy schedules. For that reason, he had to stay on top of people and their managers about resolving time conflicts and making sure the Y2K work was completed on time. "There's a lot of push and pull on them, and you have to use your conflict-resolution skills to keep the project on track."

6. Watch out for scope creep.

This is a biggie. As Jolyon Hallows writes in Information Systems Project Management (Amacom, 1998), "The biggest single cause of project overruns is changes of scope. If you do not manage them, your budget and schedule will be destroyed before you recognize that anything has happened." Hallows suggests making sure the scope is visible to everyone on the team. He also believes team meetings should include a regular, separate roundtable to discuss scope change requests.

Often, organizations make the mistake of waiting until a project is completed to do any sort of review or audit, says Health Partners' Kantola. "We try to do constant auditing to make sure we're still on track." For instance, in creating a patient-tracking system, he says, if you start adding features for users you may find yourself adding dozens. "If you give them an inch, there's always the potential they'll take a mile."

7. Maintain quality standards.

If the business needs driving the project require a change in scope, make sure the resources devoted to the project change, as well.

"We draw a triangle with the project scope on one side and the dollars and manpower resources on the other two," Kantola says. If the scope increases, the project manager must make the case that the dollars and internal hours spent must be increased accordingly or the end product will suffer. "We can't afford to have the quality suffer," Kantola says. "That is not an option."

8. Don't be afraid to call a time-out.

Moran says IT project managers get into trouble for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the project didn't have senior-level management buy-in to begin with, or the team working on it has ulterior motives. Often these projects die an early death.

He says that managers should not be afraid to take a hiatus and resolve whatever major issue is hindering progress before going any further. For example, Moran is currently working with a co-project manager who lives in Denver. "We have not developed a standard method for communicating, so we're going to get together and hash that out before we go any further," he says. "Sometimes you have to stop midstride and fix something."

9. Use a proven tracking system.

Several products exist to help you keep track of IT projects. Kantola says Health Partners uses ABT Workbench for standard projects and a "green light/red light" system for action items in status reports to executives. Geukers and her IS team tried several formats for tracking their project, she recalls. "We initially used MS Project to track and communicate progress, but found that the majority of non-IS people had trouble interpreting it." Eventually, they used Excel, Visio, or plain old word-processed task lists to keep people up to date, informed, and focused.

Some projects require more documentation than others. American Honda's Jim Dinneen decided to keep every slip of paper related to the company's Y2K project. "Sixty-two boxes of files and several gigabytes of storage," he says, when asked how much paperwork the project generated. He admits that's unusual for an IT project, but he felt it was necessary because the company was aware that litigation was a real possibility.

10. Roll with the punches.

Change is inevitable in a long, complex project. Often people get into scheduling trouble for believing vendors' promises, either about functionality or timing," King says.

Other factors beyond the project manager's control are bound to crop up. "We had three different project leaders during the project, several changes in scope, a hospital merger, a change in IS management, performance and hardware problems, you name it," Geukers says. "We became experts at adjusting and staying focused. I think if you ensure everyone wants to go live badly and is willing to adjust and make changes in order to get there, you'll succeed."