

Project Management Tales – Something Just Came Up

By Debbie Gallagher



Debbie Gallagher

Each story in this series of Project Management Tales is true, but company names have been changed. Some stories occurred in Canada and others took place in the US and overseas.

Background

A cme Corporation had a successful traditional business, selling medium and large-scale software products. Some executives had an idea for a collaborative software product, allowing multi-company teamwork in a web-based environment. After further development of the idea, and approval of the business case, a project was started to create a Web services business.

The steering committee comprised three executives, all of whom had been involved in developing the business case. The company was very excited about the prospects for the new e-business project.

Before starting the definition of functional requirements, the project manager interviewed the three executives individually, to determine what their vision was for the new software. Two of the executives agreed on a vision, but the VP Product Development had different thoughts. The project manager met with all three as a group, to try and achieve consensus. There were still significant differences. The project manager and steering committee agreed on an approach to try and achieve consensus on the product vision. They planned to meet with industry experts to get additional input on high-level requirements.

The Situation

When the first meeting was about to begin, the VP Product Development said, very apologetically, that an emergency had just come up on another project and he would be unable to attend the session.

The other two executives and the project manager continued the meeting.

Another industry expert meeting was scheduled to obtain additional information and to ensure that the VP Product Development would be able to attend. Unfortunately, a last-minute emergency again prevented the VP Product Development from attending. He urged the others to go ahead without him.

At a follow-up meeting to discuss high-level requirements based on the feedback from the industry experts, the VP Product Development didn't like the proposed product, and thought it wouldn't sell. He was unable to stay at the meeting long enough or to attend follow-up sessions where further requirements and direction were developed. However, he didn't want to hold back the team, and suggested they should forge ahead without him. He would review the more detailed requirements and early product prototypes.

Action Taken

The high-level requirements were not defined, development had not begun, yet the project was behind schedule already. All three members of the steering committee urged the project manager to get the project back on schedule. She should go ahead and develop more detailed specifications, based on the high-level requirements already developed.

In addition, the steering committee was worried about the lack of progress reported on product development, and urged the project manager to get the pro-

cess started, using the high-level design. As the more detailed requirements were established, the development team would re-work their design as needed.

Technical resources were gradually shifting. The database designer was moved to another project and replaced. The technical architect transferred to another division and was not replaced. Her work was assigned to another member of the project team. Some of the development staff were given additional high-priority work for another project by the VP Product Development.

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A key component that was to be purchased and integrated into the new product was not approved for purchase. Instead, the development team built similar functions into the product.

Epilogue

As a result of the shifting requirements, related re-work, changing and lost resources, the development of the product was behind schedule. Since competitors were moving forward with their own products, the scope of the development plan was revised, eliminating some features in order to have a product ready for sale earlier, with the intention of incorporating the removed features in a future release.

The first release of the product was made available. No one bought it, as competing products were already established and were much more robust. The product was later dropped.

Conclusion

The project manager got caught up in a “get it done” mentality, focused on the hard deliverables needed to keep the project on schedule. As a result, she did not recognize the signals that her project was doomed to fail, no matter what she did. Executive commitment to a project is a critical factor in project success. In this case, a key executive, one who was on the project steering committee, was not committed to the project. The signs of lack of commitment were evident starting from the two industry experts meetings, where “something just came up” and prevented the executive’s attendance.

By the time the VP Product Development reviewed the requirements and said he didn’t like the product, the project manager should have been giving a strong message to the steering committee that the lack of direction would cause the project to fail.

Product delays were a direct result of shifting project resources, due to the lack of executive commitment to the project.

Product delays led to the decision to cut product features in order to deliver a product to the marketplace. The late delivery with limited functionality led potential buyers to ignore the new product.

Additional product development delays were caused by the decision to start product development without good requirements. As an experienced developer, Bob Hamilton, said to me, “The quicker you start writing the code, the longer it will take”... T G

Debbie Gallagher is a Manager, Solutions at Deloitte & Touche LLP, Toronto. She can be reached at (416) 643-8767 or dgallagher@deloitte.ca. Debbie thanks Elizabeth Osso for her assistance with this story.



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