

Project Management Tales – Survivor



Debbie Gallagher

By 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 or overseas.

Background

Acme Corporation was a European software vendor, selling a configurable product for Sales Order and Payment Processing. The product was very flexible to accommodate customer requirements, but was also frequently customized due to additional specific customer needs.

Acme sold their software package to Standard Corporation, an Internet specialty retailer, during the high tech boom. Standard, like many Acme customers, liked the flexibility and features of the Acme software, but found it very complicated to understand and configure to achieve expected results. Standard also needed several customizations to suit their business requirements.

Due to the complexity of the software, Acme had trouble training its own staff on the features of the software, the customization approach and standards. Projects frequently ran late and went over budget.

The contract between Acme and Standard was structured so that there were no progress payments. Payment from Standard could only be requested after a successful User Acceptance Testing phase.

The Situation

The Standard project was running late and over budget. It was to have been completed in six months, but was still being developed at the five-month mark, and the testing phase had not started yet.

The implementation and development project at Standard had about a dozen staff, including project manager, project coordinator, an architect, a business analyst, and several developers.

During the fifth month, the project coordinator's responsibilities were diminishing so he was removed from the project. Then, immediately afterward, the project manager and the architect were removed from the Standard project to work on new Acme projects overseas. A new project manager was assigned to the Standard project, bringing the team to ten.

The tech boom was dying, and Acme started to worry about Standard's ability to pay. Acme hoped to deliver the software and get paid before Standard ran out of money. In addition, Acme was concerned that Standard might sue Acme for non-delivery of the software if they didn't finish soon. The new project manager was charged with ensuring the project was delivered as soon as possible at Standard, in order to avoid the potential lawsuit.

The project manager assessed her team and discovered they were poorly trained and had learned very little on the project so far. The architect had provided specific answers to questions from the developers, without explaining the business and software design background that would help them understand the product and their own work better. A new architect was not going to be assigned to the Standard team.

A further discovery was that the team was sometimes building additional functionality than what had been agreed in the project charter.

Action Taken

The new project manager immediately re-focussed the development team on the project charter as the definitive guide to what was to be built.

In addition, the project manager realized that a new architect, although not available to the project, was critical to getting the job done. She evaluated the developers on the team and found that one was a resourceful, determined person with good analytical capabilities. This developer was re-assigned to the architect role.

The new architect did whatever analysis was needed to resolve issues and was also able to teach what he learned to the other developers. Progress was being made.

As the developers became more competent, other Acme project managers began poaching them for other projects where there was a greater likelihood of being paid for the work. The project manager had trouble maintaining any stability in the development staff on the project.

Then, during the sixth month, the business analyst took a long-planned one-month vacation. By the time the business analyst returned, Acme had announced job cuts and removed three of the project's seven developers, without any notice to the project manager.

At about the same time as Acme's job cuts, Standard announced that they were dissatisfied with the early results of User Acceptance Testing and would do no further testing until the existing defects were fixed.

Although the client was not contractually entitled to stop the testing phase, the project manager agreed because she didn't have enough developers to complete the fixes. Having the testing stop allowed the corrections to be completed without new bugs being added to the work list.

The project manager needed to get the bugs fixed but was desperately short of resources. Because the project was at the bug-fix stage, the project manager decided that short-term resources were adequate for completing the work. She approached other project managers at Acme and asked to borrow resources for short periods of time. For example, if a developer was not assigned for a few weeks prior to taking vacation in one or two weeks, the project manager used that developer on the Standard project.

When the existing defects were fixed, the User Acceptance Testing resumed. The project manager continued to borrow developers for very short periods to correct deficiencies.

Epilogue

When the User Acceptance Testing was completed, Acme requested payment from Standard. The contract specified thirty-day payment terms, after which Standard said there was no money to pay Acme for the software implementation and development fees.

Acme issued a legal notice to Standard that due to non-payment, Standard was not entitled to use the software.

Conclusions

The developer assigned to be the new architect was reluctant to take on the role, as he felt under qualified. However, he was a good choice because he had the skills to figure out the solution to issues, and as he learned, he shared his knowledge with the developers.

Developers who temporarily could not be used on longer-term projects were a good solution to the problem of staffing the Standard job. These resources were not earning fees on other projects; so there was no additional cost to having them work on the Standard project.

The project manager had no support from her own organization to provide adequate resources to the project. However, her novel staffing approaches allowed her to complete the work so that a non-delivery lawsuit was averted.

The project manager was wise to ensure that the team delivered only what had been specifically contracted. Scope creep can eat up time, and time was critical to avoiding a lawsuit. 

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[Debbie's previous "Project Management Tales" are available on her personal web site: www.gallaghers.ca/debbie.]

COMMON Note: Attendees to the COMMON IT Education Conference & Expo in Indianapolis, March 9-13, 2003, can now register online for labs. The following link provides more information, including the labs offered...

http://www.common.org/Conferences/conferences_03/spring/S03labreg.html

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WebSphere Commerce Suite

Net.Commerce V2 API's

(Downloaded from IBM)

The Net.Commerce system uses API functions to process some information and to perform certain calculations and process parameters that are passed into some commands. API functions allow merchants to extend built-in commands (for instance, to send an email notification to shoppers who submit orders).

API functions can also write information to the database. You can write your own API programs to change the way in which such calculations are performed and maintain custom information in the Net.Commerce database.

You can even write your own API programs to connect the Net.Commerce system to a legacy system, such as an order processing system. For more information, please look at your on-line help.

Note: There is a savefile you may download which contains a list of sample over-written APIs for Net.Commerce on AS/400 and iSeries processors.

To download this savefile, go to:

<http://www-919.ibm.com/developer/e biz/netcommerce/r2apis.html>