Project Management Tales –
No Time to Plan, Busy Coding

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 and overseas.

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Background

Acme Corporation was a mid-size retailer with offices in Canada and in France. They had two legacy systems, one in each country. Acme decided to replace both legacy systems with one common ERP system, including all financial and distribution modules.

The Situation

Early in the project, a programmer in France was assigned to develop data conversion programs to load data from the two old systems into the new system. The programmer was fairly knowledgeable about the French legacy system but not familiar with the Canadian system or the new ERP system. In addition, although the programmer's experience with the French legacy system provided her with a reasonably good knowledge of the business and its system requirements, she had no experience with managing a project.

Several members of the implementation team expressed their concerns to the project manager. Surely the one programmer would not have time to plan and develop all of the conversion programs needed from both legacy systems. The project manager was not worried. The programmer had always got assigned tasks done in the past, and surely it wouldn't be a problem to code a couple of conversion programs.

Action Taken

After several weeks, there was no visible action from the programmer and the other team members decided to get the process under way. The functional team leader for the Purchasing and Accounts Payable modules called a meeting to discuss data conversion requirements for vendor master and purchase orders. The functional team leader for Sales and Accounts Receivable called a meeting to discuss conversion requirements for sales orders, pricing, and customer master. The programmer took some notes at these meetings and went away to start coding extracts from the French legacy system. She did not provide any confirmation to the team members about what would be delivered. In addition, she spent no time working on extraction of data from the Canadian system.

The team members continued to question the project manager about how the data conversion was going to get done. After a few more weeks, the project manager assigned a second programmer to write the data conversion programs for the Canadian data. The two programmers had no shared design to ensure that the separate work done for the two legacy systems would have similar results in the new ERP system.

The team members kept voicing their concerns to the project manager, that the data conversion was not well planned, that there might not be consistency in the data from the two countries and that the conversion might not be done on time. The project manager saw no need for the programmers to stop their programming responsibilities to create a plan.

At the project status meetings, it became clear that the team members and the programmers had different ideas about what was being delivered. As a result, additional meetings were held and the programmers took notes on additional files to be converted. When data was loaded into the new system for testing, the team members were shocked at how many fields were missing or incorrect. The team members again approached the project manager with their concerns about the data conversion and whether it would be on time and of acceptable quality.

The project manager still thought it didn't make sense to stop and coordinate efforts between the two countries or to create a project plan at this late date. He decided that the programmers were too busy coding to be planning.

Epilogue

When the go-live date was less than a month away, the system implementation was going according to plan, but the data conversion work was significantly behind, and the project manager started to worry.

Fortunately, the project manager was directed by the steering committee to delay the project go-live date by three months. Acme was acquiring another company and the system implementation would be delayed for a few months to allow Acme to focus on store amalgamations and training the new employees on Acme's way of selling products. The project manager was very relieved. He did not have to be the one to defer the go-live date due to a late and unsuitable data conversion.

Conclusion

The project manager made an invalid assumption right from the start and kept to it even despite evidence that proved him wrong. He thought that since the French programmer had always got the

job done when given assigned tasks that she would also be able to deliver when the project needed to be defined, planned and managed. Project management was not a skill the programmer had developed yet and the assumption was therefore unfair.

In addition, although the project manager monitored the progress of the implementation project very carefully, he didn't pay much attention to the scope, resourcing and delivery of the data conversion. His mistake was to assume that data conversion was a small and easy task, compared to the ERP implementation. If he had ensured that a scope was defined and a plan was developed at the start, he would have known the extent of the work to be done.

The effort to define the scope and coordinate the efforts of the two countries would not have been a waste of time. Except for the company's timely acquisition of a competitor, the project manager would have faced an embarrassing and costly project delay, due to his reluctance to define and plan the data conversion. Unfortunately, both programmers seemed to be uncomfortable with asking for help. They would have been wise to insist to the project manager that they needed another resource assigned to them to do (or assist with) the planning and coordination of the two countries' requirements.

If the project manager wanted the programmers to develop management skills, it would have been useful to provide guidance for the programmers on how to plan and manage the work. **TUG**

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