Project Management Tales –
The Deluge

By Debbie Gallagher

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In two previous articles (January and March 1999), I outlined what to include in the project plan, and a general overview of what's involved in execution and completion of the project. To follow up, I thought it might be interesting to tell you some project management tales. Some of these are stories about projects I've been involved in, while others are stories told to me by co-workers in Canada and abroad. All company names have been changed.

Background

The Acme Corporation decided to outsource their order taking and fulfillment functions. This arrangement would include two subsidiaries owned by Acme. The outsource company chosen was Standard Inc. After Standard took over, they would provide data to Acme each month on the orders taken and shipped, so that Acme could record the proper revenues in its ledgers. In order to provide this data, custom interfaces would be designed and developed.

The new interfaces had to provide financial data for three separate financial systems (the Acme corporate system and the systems of the two subsidiaries). However, Standard was to create one file and then split it into three for distribution to Acme and the two subsidiaries. The three companies would need to define common requirements for the interface. To ensure that one file and interface design would fulfill the needs of three companies, the creation of the functional design required many people to work together. To start with, there were financial and systems representatives for Acme corporate office, as well as their counterparts in the two other companies. In addition, the Acme Distribution and Shipping department was involved, as they were the most familiar with how the current Acme systems and processes worked. The Acme Sales Tax department sent a representative to ensure that the design would adequately support tax reporting.

The Situation

With so many participants involved and multiple organizations and systems to serve, progress on the common design was very slow. In addition, many issues surfaced during the design discussions. They were documented in minutes of the meeting and assigned to individuals for follow up. However, some issues were very time-consuming to resolve and held up progress on the design. The design was not complete by Standard's deadline, so the business analyst for Standard began to attend the design sessions to learn what she could about the requirements.

Between design meetings, several participants were sending email and phone messages to the business analyst at Standard, letting her know about the various issues and proposed resolutions. The business analyst at the vendor began to receive twenty, then thirty, and then forty messages per day about design concerns.

The functional design was completed, with several exceptions related to outstanding issues. The analyst continued to receive emails about the issues. Then, as the technical specifications were being developed at Acme and the two subsidiaries, there were additional questions. The email deluge grew to fifty messages per day to the analyst. The staff at Acme and its subsidiaries complained that the analyst was unresponsive and not able to answer questions or address issues. They were beginning to question the ability of Standard to complete the interface. Standard, however, felt that Acme was not being fair, as the design was late being completed, and issues were continuing to be raised long after Standard had expected them to be settled.

Action Taken

The project manager reviewed several of the emails with the facilitator who had been working with the participants to create the functional design.

The content of each message required some assessment of the impact on other aspects of the design. In addition, there were frequently other parties to consult before a resolution could be reached. For instance, if Acme head office wanted sales orders to be summarized differently, the two subsidiaries would have to be consulted to see if the change would be acceptable. On top of these considerations, the volume of messages to be dealt with was very high. They concluded that the Standard's analyst could not possibly have time to answer the volume of issues and questions. Unfortunately, Standard's analyst did not have help, and getting someone at Standard assigned and then up-to-date on the project and issues would take too long.

However, the facilitator had been involved with all parties already, so was knowledgeable about the project details. The project manager decided that the facilitator would coordinate all issues and questions. Everyone who wanted to question or raise an issue with Standard's analyst had to send it to the facilitator. The facilitator would coordinate all the requests, prioritize, and summarize them for a once-daily phone meeting with the analyst at Standard. In addition, the facilitator would do all the coordination between Acme and its subsidiaries for requests for changes.
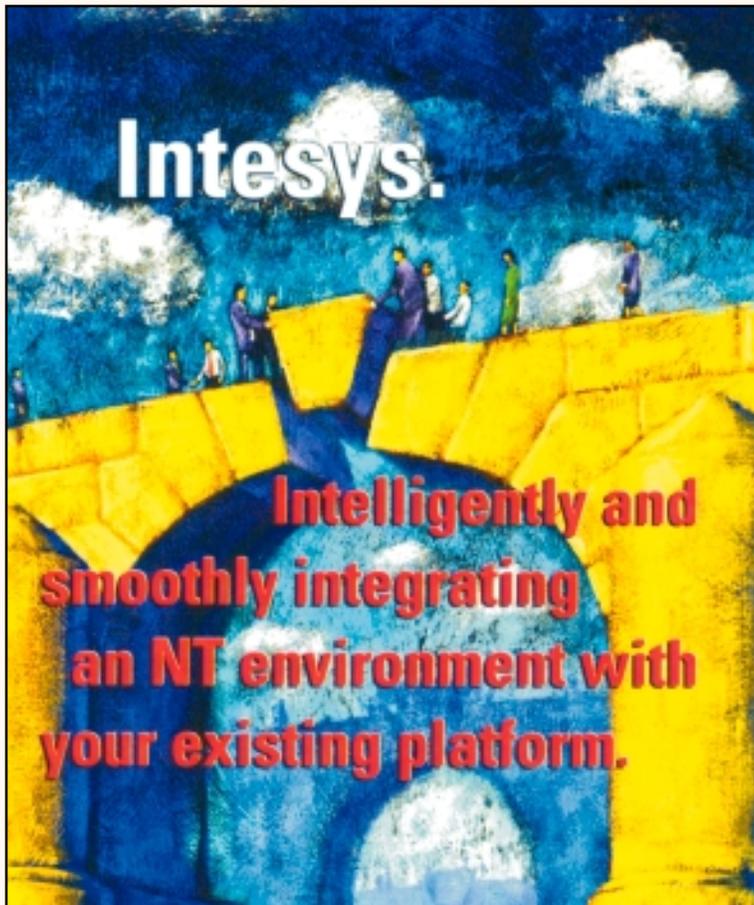
Epilogue

It took a few weeks for the backlog of issues and questions to be cleared up. However, the assignment of the facilitator to work as an assistant to Standard's analyst did work, and the backlog lessened. In addition, when the analyst had a question or issue for Acme, she could have the facilitator coordinate with Acme and the subsidiaries, and determine a common answer. With so many parties to consider, this coordination saved a lot of time for the analyst.

Conclusion

The project manager had heard continuous complaints from both sides. Acme complained about how unhelpful and unresponsive Standard was, while Standard blamed Acme for causing the project to be so late. However, the project manager realized that pointing fingers was not getting the job done. So, he focused on assessing and solving the problem. The problem was that the analyst at Standard had too much work. The project manager's solution was to assign an extra resource, a knowledgeable one, to help out the analyst. TUG

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