Project Management Tales –

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

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By Debbie Gallagher

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 design and develop new software for accounts payable and accounts receivable. They had already decided that these modules were outdated and had to be replaced. In addition, there were significant changes being made to sales tax legislation in several states. The existing systems could not accommodate the new tax rules, so Acme decided the new systems would have to be ready by the time the legislation took effect.

Acme had large offices in two states, and decided to split the development effort, so that accounts payable would be developed in one location and accounts receivable in the other.

The project manager was located in Smithville, where accounts payable was being developed. She hired an assistant project manager to run the accounts receivable development project in Yorktown.

The project manager and assistant prepared project plans, ensuring adequate resources for design, programming, and testing, in order to have the new systems ready by the time the tax changes took effect in six months.

The Situation

The development work began. The accounts payable design and development went well in Smithville. The usual number and types of issues surfaced, but the project was on track.

Each week, the project manager held a phone meeting with her assistant project manager, to discuss progress on the accounts receivable project. The assistant always sounded confident, and reported that everything was going well in Yorktown, with no significant issues impeding progress.

The project manager was very surprised to receive a phone call from the controller in Yorktown after about two months. The controller was very agitated, as she had expected the first simple data entry programs to be available for testing, but they were not ready. The controller had not even been able to see an adequate demo of the programs.

Action Taken

The project manager immediately traveled to Yorktown to investigate. She discovered that there wasn't nearly as much work done as expected. The programs for which development had been started were poorly done, using a style the project manager called "spaghetti code".

The project manager had a serious problem – the system now had to be ready within four months instead of the expected six months, and there was almost no salvageable work completed.

Most of the programmers who had been working on the accounts receivable programs were contractors and the project manager fired them. She replaced them with new, more skilled programmers. She also fired the assistant project manager.

The project manager met with the controller and other key users. She outlined her plan for finishing the project on time. The key was to determine what functions were critical for the first day of operation of the new system. The users indicated that the two major billing functions and cash entry were critical and had to be done for go-live. The rest of the functions were ranked according to when they had to be used for the first time.

Epilogue

On the date the new tax law was in effect, the new accounts receivable system was live. The billing and cash entry functions worked. There were no management reports, and no other functions. The remaining programs were delivered over the next several weeks according to the ranking done by the users.

The users were relieved. They had been so worried that they would have no system available to fulfill the requirements of the new tax law.

Conclusion

Once the project manager discovered the project was behind schedule, she quickly analyzed the problem and took steps to make sure the project finished on time.

The deadline could not be moved, due to the impending tax changes. In addition, adding resources would have been extremely difficult – she already had to get new programmers up to speed. So, the clear choice was to reduce the scope of the project to meet the deadline.

Unfortunately, it took too long for the project manager to find out that the accounts receivable project was behind schedule and staffed with poor quality programmers.

The second location for program development should have been identified as a risk to the project. Then, the first step in risk mitigation should have been careful selection of the assistant project manager and the programmers. It would have been wise of the project manager to spend more time and maybe more money on more experienced resources.
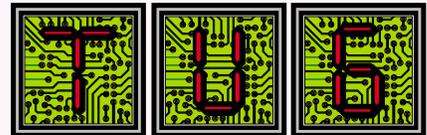
The next risk mitigation strategy ought to have involved the development of the project plan. The plan should have included small early deliverables, even very small pieces such as file definitions or simple data entry forms. This approach would allow the project manager to assess the timeliness and quality of the work very early.

During the project, strong reporting practices would have provided the project manager a good view of progress. For example, the project manager could have insisted that the assistant update the project plan each week, showing progress on each task, and explaining any discrepancies.

The project manager did solve the problem and the must-have components of the project were completed on time. However, earlier recognition of the risk and implementation of mitigation strategies may have allowed the entire project to be delivered on time, with less worry for the users in Yorktown. T☐G
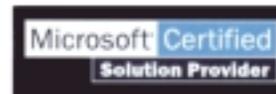
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