

Project Management Tales – Sleepless Nights



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, a European manufacturer, was implementing a new ERP system. They had completed the implementation of the general ledger and accounts payable modules and started on billing.

Acme had found the data conversion to their new general ledger system very difficult. The team had worked many long nights and lost sleep worrying about whether the final result would be right. The Acme team knew that the conversion for billing would be much more complicated. They decided to eliminate the sleepless nights by hiring the expertise to do the conversion programs. Standard Consulting was hired to develop the data conversion programs for the billing module.

Acme's legacy billing system was more than twenty years old. It was running on hardware and an operating system that were no longer sold. In addition, it was custom software, developed by a person who was no longer available to support it or explain how it worked.

The billing implementation team met and decided what data they needed converted, in order to support internal and external reporting, as well as long-term billing needs. They used these requirements to create a strategy document, which they gave to the Standard Consulting project manager.

Standard's project manager assigned a technical team lead to review the strategy document, and prepare a project plan and cost estimate. Standard's project

manager was satisfied with the plan and cost, and so was Acme. The conversion programs were to be ready for testing by the implementation team in five weeks.

The Situation

After three weeks, the budget was half gone. This was approximately as expected. However, the project manager had not seen any deliverables yet. The technical team leader had not submitted her status reports, and when pressed, provided only vague verbal reassurances that everything was under control. She seemed unclear on how she would know that her development team was finished.

Although there were several components required to convert the billing data, there were no pieces ready to test by the five-week deadline. Again, the technical lead was vague and assured the project manager that the programs were progressing.

After about seven weeks, programs were ready for testing, and the billing implementation team lead was asked to review the sample data in the new system.

The billing team lead was unhappy. This data wasn't even close to what was required. There were significant differences between what was stated in the requirements document and what had been built. In addition, there were

several components that had not been built at all. The technical team lead was also unhappy, since she had developed a perfectly elegant solution to the technical challenge of extracting data from the legacy system, and the client was not appropriately appreciative of the effort or outcome.

Action Taken

The Standard Consulting project manager added a business analyst to the technical team. He was to review the design of the conversion programs compared to the requirements, and determine what re-work and new development was required. However, there were no detailed design documents to review, only the original strategy document.

So, the business analyst assessed each component by developing the detailed design, working with the technical lead and billing lead to solve discrepancies between what was needed and what had been built.

Standard Consulting was committed to delivering what had been promised to Acme. Significant parts of the conversion programs were re-written, and the missing components were developed.

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

Epilogue

Testing became very time consuming. The programs had not been built for the volume of data and complexity that was really required. So, whenever one bug was fixed, others would appear. More than a dozen rounds of testing were required for some components. The billing implementation team couldn't keep up with the testing, so Standard had to provide additional testers.

The project cost went three hundred per cent over budget. The billing team and the technical team worked nights and weekends to complete testing and program revisions.

The Acme project manager and billing implementation team were concerned that the conversion programs would not be useable on time, and lost sleep as a result of their worries.

The go-live date was not delayed. However, only the basic functionality could be used right away, because not all of the conversion components were ready.


The technical team continued to work for another month to complete the remaining components.

Conclusions

The project plan prepared by the technical team leader should have been the first sign to the project manager that something was amiss. The technical lead had been focused on the technical complexities of extracting data from the legacy system, and had planned only technical deliverables. She had included a task for preparation and a milestone for sign off of technical design, but no preparation and sign off of functional design.

The next sign of a problem was the lack of status reporting from the technical lead. When she tried to give just vague reassurances, the project manager was rightly concerned, but should have pushed harder and earlier for proper status reporting, with progress described for each component. This would have allowed the project manager to identify earlier that components outlined in the strategy document were missing.

Once it was clear that there was a problem, the project manager should have insisted on a new project plan and budget being created. Instead, he developed a priority list of components to be fixed or developed, to focus efforts on the critical pieces needed to go live, and everyone just kept working until all of the programs were done. As the fix-it time continued, this approach led to some concerns on the team that the project might be never-ending.

In the end, the client go-live deadline was achieved, and all of the components were finished. The data conversion programs ran successfully and loaded correct data into the new system. However, the client was not happy. Acme was not interested in the technical elegance of the delivered programs. What they wanted, and didn't get, was programs that met their requirements and allowed them to sleep at night, without worrying about their data conversion. 

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