

Project Management Tales – Broken Telephone

By Debbie Gallagher



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 large German financial institution, decided to eliminate its personal credit card business to focus on commercial customers. As a result, Acme agreed to sell its database of customer information to a competitor.

Standard Consulting was engaged to extract the customer data and transform it into a format that the competitor could load into its own system. The competitor was creating a new marketing database system, and had hired a team of developers to build it for them. The Acme project manager estimated that it would take Standard about four months to complete the work.

The Situation

There was considerable concern among Acme management about the possibility of disclosure to the competitor of any data in the database beyond the specific customer data that had been sold. To alleviate management's concern, the Acme project manager decided to act as the communication channel between Standard and the competitor.

The consultants from Standard could not speak directly with the competitor or with the competitor's development firm. Instead, they directed their questions

by email to the project manager at Acme. Then the Acme project manager would obtain an answer from the competitor and direct it back to Standard. The communication process was cumbersome and time-consuming. Because the questions and answers were all exchanged by email, there was no opportunity to ensure that the receiving party completely understood the question being asked and as a result, it would sometimes not be answered satisfactorily. Follow up questions would be needed, and the process was repeated.

Because the competitor's marketing database was still being developed, the data requirements were still changing, resulting in changes to the extraction programs being built. Sometimes these changes were not communicated to Standard via Acme quickly enough, and as a result test migrations of data would fail.

In addition, the project manager had other responsibilities, so follow up of slow responses didn't occur as early as they should. The project ran late, but still the process continued. Some issues required significant analysis and discussion between Standard and Acme's competitor, but all of these took place via email through the Acme project manager.



Action Taken

The project had now run for twelve months instead of four, and still it was not finished. Acme was concerned that it might be sued by the competitor for non-delivery of the customer data. The Acme project manager was replaced. The new project manager met with the Acme and Standard teams to develop a comprehensive list of outstanding tasks and the dates by which the tasks needed to be done.

In addition, she had brief team meetings every day. At the daily meeting, the tasks due that day were determined to have been completed or to have slipped. If a task had slipped, remedial action was taken immediately. Representatives of the competitor attended part of the meeting by phone, so that outstanding issues requiring their input could be resolved immediately.

Epilogue

The project finished after sixteen months, a full twelve months longer than the original estimate of four months. Acme's competitor did successfully load the customer data into the new marketing database system, and Acme did avoid getting sued.

Conclusion

The original time estimate for the work was much too low. The Acme project manager did not realize the impact on the timeline of having so many parties involved in the process. Those who have successfully delivered multi-party, multi-location projects are painfully aware of

Dear Editor:

This is the end of my series. Many thanks to you and the TUG readers for allowing me space in the magazine for such a long time. I've really enjoyed the series, from interviewing project managers about their successes and failures, to hearing feedback from TUG readers.

Sincerely,
Debbie Gallagher

how time-consuming the coordination effort is. Anything that can be resolved in an hour with one company involved can easily take ten hours with three parties involved. There is significant effort in the scheduling, discussion, resolution, and follow up for every issue. This data migration project had four parties: Acme; Standard; the competitor; and the competitor's development team. Dealing with multiple locations is also time-consuming, as the immediacy of face-to-face contact is lost. Sometimes, when the related team is not physically present, it is easier to forget to keep them up to date. This project had two locations, one with Acme and Standard, and another with the competitor and its development team.


The communication process designed by the original project manager was rigid. However, it could have been made workable by assigning that liaison role to someone else. Because the project manager had other responsibilities, the management of the communication process often fell to a lower priority and caused project delays.

The project manager should have considered placing a person to fulfill that analyst/communication role full time. That analyst should have been given the authority to speak with both parties by phone and in person, in addition to using email correspondence. This would have improved the response time for questions and issues considerably. It also would have reduced the number of times that emails went back and forth between parties who were trying to understand the issue well enough to get it resolved. Key hiring criteria for that analyst role would be verbal and written communication skills, organization, documentation (to capture decisions and agreements), and ability to prioritize issues.

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

The cost of that one additional person on the job would have been significantly less expensive than having Standard continue to re-work and wait for issue resolution from the competitor.

When it was clear that the project tasks and issues were not being completed on time, the new project manager did the right thing by ensuring very frequent

meetings to review completion status and follow up. The new project manager also brought the competitor to the status meetings, a step that helped immeasurably in getting issues resolved quickly. 

Debbie Gallagher is a Manager at Deloitte, Toronto. She can be reached at (416) 643-8767 or dgallagher@deloitte.ca.

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