

The Strategic Workforce Planner

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4 WAYS TO INCREASE PROJECT SUCCESS WITH PLANNING

As a fresh graduate with ample energy and excitement, I was eager and ready to prove myself to the world. After a quick onboarding process, I was assigned to my new company's Fortune 500 client, responsible for delivering an extensive training program. With both enthusiasm and determination, I set out to deliver the most amazing training program ever!

As time progressed, I became frustrated. Lack of experience presented some challenges and my motivation plummeted. I was struggling to keep my project within budget and on time, and I knew the project needed a "reset." After revisiting and adjusting the project plan, I got the team back on track, and, in the end, I was proud to deliver a product exceeding the client's expectations.

Years later, I am able to reflect on the experience as a critical learning opportunity. As a project manager today, I use the lessons I learned through that early experience to deliver quality projects, on time and on budget. Now, I have the opportunity to share my lessons as a way to help you increase your performance and success as a project manager!

One key lesson I've learned over the years as a project manager is the importance of expending enough effort in the initial planning phase of a project. Knowing the end goal is not enough; you must dedicate time and energy to creating a solid plan to reach it. Just like using a compass to find a target, the longer you continue off course, the further away you travel from your goal. Even if the miscalculation is slight, it will prove increasingly catastrophic over time.

On that note, I have outlined four common pitfalls project managers experience during the project planning phase, as well as some easy and effective ways to overcome them. Not only do I have firsthand experience overcoming these potential project threats, they are also highlighted in studies by the Harvard Business Review (HBR) and Project Management Institute (PMI).

1) Identify Milestones

Naturally, when you are assigned a new project your initial thought is something like, "Oh my, I need help, and I need to make a plan!" Creating a project plan helps you reduce the risk of failing to execute the designated activities within the plan. In fact, the HBR dubs this risk as "execution risk," and it represents a real problem.

So the question now becomes, how do you design project plans to more effectively reduce execution risk? Identifying project milestones, which can be achieved and celebrated throughout the duration of the project, is one effective way. This is an opportunity for you to take careful consideration of your client's needs and expectations, as well as the resources available to your team.

Milestones are important events marked on your project timeline which help you keep track of key dates and deadlines. When creating your milestones, you should consider their importance, timing and fallibility. In other words, ensure that your milestones are relevant enough to be marked, timed appropriately to maintain momentum and motivation, and challenging enough to keep the team on track and focused.

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2) Assign Roles and Tasks

It is common for project managers to use a Responsibility Assignment Matrix (RAM), also known as a RACI chart, to plan and manage projects. Projects with a large scope can have highly detailed responsibility charts. Smaller projects may have a simple outline of who is responsible for each task identified in the project plan. Depending on the scope of your project, you may want a highly detailed, or rather simplified responsibility chart.

The key here is that team members are informed of their responsibilities and there is no confusion surrounding assignments and roles. To keep it simple, add an extra column to your project timeline to indicate the assigned team members' tasks instead of creating a separate document.

For more advanced RACI charts, consider assigning the following project or task roles:

- ❖ **Responsible:** Person who performs the task
- ❖ **Accountable:** Person who is accountable and has yes/no/veto authority
- ❖ **Consulted:** Person who provides feedback and insight on the task
- ❖ **Informed:** Person who needs to know when the decision or action is completed

3) Brainstorm to Avoid Risks

There are three main risks to traditional project planning: "white space risk" (failing to anticipate activities or potential problems), "execution risk" (members fail to carry out activities), and "integration risk" (failure to integrate project pieces together at the end).

Clearly, it will be easiest to identify the white space risks during the planning phase and before the project gets underway. As a project planner, allow yourself ample time to consider white space risks, and you will feel more prepared. Consider communicating these risks to your team. Opening up the dialogue will help create buy-in, as well as identify potential problems and solutions to these risks.

Let the creativity flow with an open brainstorming session before you finalize any plans. Some like to call it brain dumping - anything and everything that comes to mind should be communicated. Ensure that the atmosphere is positive and free of judgment. Doing so helps close gaps in the project plan and ultimately increases the success of the project.

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4) Increase Communication

Effective communication is a highly critical aspect of project management and planning. In fact, a study by the PMI found that half of all unsuccessful projects failed due to ineffective communication. In my experience, I would agree that taking the time to plan for effective communication can make or break the success of a project.

So plan for effective communication! Doing so will increase your ability to finish projects on time, meet original project goals and stay within budget!

Send out a recurring project review meeting invite to all appropriate stakeholders before the launch meeting. By communicating regularly with clients and stakeholders, you ensure everyone is on the right path. Also, you may uncover new information which may significantly impact the project, and you can provide your client the opportunity to react to this important, new information. Think of it as resetting your compass to ensure your team is heading in the right direction!

The project launch meeting also represents an opportunity to emphasize the importance of team communication throughout the project. Insert a task or goal in project management documents to maintain frequent communication, both internally and externally, with clients.



Fortunately, there is a plethora of information, tools, project management apps, checklists, etc. available online. Now that you are aware of the importance of project planning, I encourage you to explore these tools and resources. Choose simple tools if you are just starting out, or explore more in-depth project management applications for larger scope projects to add more detail. If you remember one thing, it should be the importance and criticality of the project planning phase. Devoting more time and care to your project upfront will undoubtedly increase its probability of success.

References:

Matta, Nadim and Ashkenas, Ronald. "Why Good Projects Fail Anyway." Harvard Business Review. 2003.

Project Management Institute, Inc. Pulse of the Profession In-Depth Report: The High Cost of Low Performance: The Essential Role of Communications, May 2013. PMI.org/Pulse



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