

# Selecting and Supervising an HRMS Project Manager

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Many factors contribute to the success of each Human Resource Management Systems (HRMS) project, but the critical success factors are top management's commitment/support, and effective project management. Given effective project management and sustained management support, such important issues as functional scope, budget and schedule, staffing, user or IS preparedness, vendor relations and even technical environment can be resolved without jeopardizing the project.

On successful projects, these two critical success factors are inextricably linked. Effective project managers are rarely attracted to (nor can they be drafted for) projects doomed by their lack of committed sponsors. However, projects which enjoy committed (and, hopefully, enlightened) sponsorship will quickly attract the princess of project managers, along with the frogs. Since any project you initiate, by definition, will be well-sponsored and supported, this article describes how to select and then supervise your HRMS project manager.

## Selecting Project Manager

For all but the smallest and least complicated HRMS projects, we are looking for a renaissance person to lead us. The essential qualities and skills include:

**Substantial, even expert knowledge of the project's business objectives**  
HRMS project managers should be conversant with the HRMS processes/functions and information model addressed by the project. On large projects, the real functional experts may be lead project analysts, but the project manager must still appreciate the implications of the functional is-

*On successful systems projects, top management support and the ability to find ideal project managers are inextricably linked. Assuming you have the support needed to attract top project managers, this article examines how to select and supervise these leaders.*



issues for other project parameters. If your project manager candidate's only prior experience was in air traffic control, reconsider his/her selection for all but the largest HRMS project. And eliminate immediately any candidate who thinks an HRMS project is trivial compared to other business applications.

### **Authority and willingness to commit required project resources**

Although the project's sponsor(s) officially allocate resources and delegate authority to the project, the project manager, on a day-to-day basis, must deploy these resources against the workplan. There's no room here for indecision or vaguely worded assignments. Each project participant must understand precisely what is expected of him/her, when specific deliverables are due, and how their particular assignments fit into the overall project plan. Individual assignments will vary, and the workplan itself is a living document. However, the project manager must be perceived at all times as acting with authority and with a willingness to accept responsibility for his/her decisions as to the deployment of project resources.

### **Ability to advise users about the system's impact**

Today's strategic HRMS projects do not simply automate existing procedures. The intent of the HRMS project should be to substantially change and improve the way we conduct the business of human resource management. As we move toward paperless offices and toward the use of computers for HR decision support, modeling, and as expert systems, the HRMS project manager must be both educator and public relations expert. The project manager must be the chief spokesperson for the project with respect to how the organization will be affected by it. Unless the organization is fully prepared to interact effectively with it, the new system will be a failure however elegant its software or technical environment. For those HRMS projects that have considerable technical impact, or that utilize a technical environment that is new to the HR or IS organizations, the HRMS project manager, in his/her advisory role, must pay particular attention to the IS community. Thus, our effective project manager must have good written and oral communication skills. He/she must understand the psychology and culture of the organization and be able to present the HRMS' impact in an understandable context. And our project manager must recognize that this role of advising the organization is not a one shot deal; it is an ongoing communications process.

### **Adequate technical competence to manage the HRMS project**

Every HRMS project, regardless of its size or complexity, is a systems project with technical implications. Except for the largest and most complex custom systems project, the HRMS project manager need not be an experienced software engineer or software architect. However, even for a modest, packaged-based implementation, the HRMS project manager

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must understand how technical issues impact the project's workplan, how to manage technical staff, how to arbitrate among alternative technical solutions, the business implications of various technologies and how they could be used to corporate advantage and, most of all, how not to be either confused or intimidated by technical staff or issues. If the HRMS project is a substantial upgrade of a home-grown HRMS, the project manager should have a good feel for the existing system. If the HRMS project will implement a commercially available HRMS, then knowledge of that specific package would be very helpful. Where custom software development is needed, either for the system as a whole or to enhance or augment a packaged-based HRMS, then a thorough understanding of the various tasks, tools and techniques for a custom software development life cycle is essential. The larger and more complex the overall HRMS project, the more systems expertise is needed to manage it. However, on very large projects, the project team will usually include, perhaps as a deputy project manager or technical team leader, an individual who will be the real expert on the project's technical issues.

#### **Excellent Political and People Management Skills**

Closely related to advising users on the impact of the project and to deploying the project's people resources is the ability to interact effectively with and guide the project team, steering committee(s), prospective users, and all the other "interested parties". In any organization, the winds of change will blow throughout the HRMS project. Although systems projects may appear to have a life of their own, they can neither ignore nor offend their cultural context, thus, the project manager, as chief spokesperson for the project, must be sensitive to that culture, aware of changes, and responsive rather than reactive to the needs of the organization for which the system is being developed. With respect to people management skills, not only the project team but many other people resources are needed to

*"Systems projects can neither offend nor ignore their cultural context." This requires responsiveness to the organization for which the HRMS is being developed, including diverse constituencies that usually include IS people, line managers, and vendors as well as the project team.*



achieve success: the IS or HR managers whose staffs must support the project while conducting their own day-to-day responsibilities; the software vendor upon whose product support staff you will rely; and even the facilities management people whose forbearance may be needed to install quickly new telephone lines, terminals or additional office space to support the project team. The project manager must be able to gain respect and cooperation from these and many other players if the project is to be a success. For the committed members of the project team, the project manager also represents line management for the duration of the project, and must be able to train, coach, lead, develop and inspire these team members.

#### **Proven ability to move the project forward in the face of real or "imagined" obstacles**

Any sizable HRMS project will encounter changes in project scope, shifting resources, staffing crises, and many other predictable or unforeseen (i.e. "Acts of God") changes in project resources, objectives and constraints, or organizational and technical environment. While the project manager should not be expected to walk on

water, a good project manager will be able to keep focused on the project's overall goals and to keep staff working productively. Furthermore, system's sponsors, users, DP management, auditors, and other "interested parties" should feel that they understand, at an appropriate level of detail, the progress of a well-managed project. On a well-managed project, predictable changes in project parameters should not create panic or disrupt the project's overall budget and schedule. These types of changes, e.g. a long in-process tax law change, should have been anticipated and contingencies built into the workplan. Even "Acts of God", e.g. a rapacious headhunter recruiting both team leaders, should not create panic in a well-managed project. Although "Acts of God" usually have considerable impact on the project's schedule, budget, team structure, etc., their effects should be understood quickly and reported to management. No HRMS project of any size can reach a successful conclusion if every unforeseen circumstance and thorny issue is allowed to derail the project's progress. Thus, the effective project manager must be able to recognize real problems and ensure that the project's day-to-day activities are not disrupted unduly while these major problems are addressed.

#### **Maturity to accept full project responsibility**

When asked about their last major systems project, an effective project manager will describe the team's successes and/or his/her failures, not the reverse. While all HRMS projects must have considerable management input, perhaps including a steering committee to review major project deliverables, as well as consulting support from many other parts of the organization, the project manager must remember that committees advise and managers decide. For those issues which are explicitly outside the authority of the project manager, a steering committee or other management group may well review the recommendations of the project manager and reach a decision. But for

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most day-to-day activities of the project, the management/supervision of the project will have delegated to the project manager sufficient authority to make necessary decisions. Therefore, the effective project manager accepts responsibility for whatever goes wrong and shares credit for every success.

### **Stamina and a sense of humor**

There's no substitute for hard work and occasional long hours on a successful HRMS project. Although it can learn from analogous projects and build upon past experiences, every such project is a one-of-a-kind undertaking which encounters unforeseen occurrences and thorny issues. However complete a workplan is developed at the beginning of the project, it is a living document and must respond to the project's changing demands. Occasionally, it's necessary to expand the work week in order to accommodate the project's demands and still remain on schedule. A project manager who is inflexible or unable to laugh at these "little" inconveniences is going to quickly wear out, along with the project team. Learning to accept the unavoidable and keep perspective are critical qualities in an HRMS project manager.

## **Supervising the Project Manager**

Few HRMS projects will be managed by an individual possessing all of the skills described above. More often, the management of the project becomes a joint effort among the designated project manager, key project staff members and the project supervisor. The project supervisor is often the executive sponsor of the project or another executive designated by the project steering committee. This project supervisor is responsible for ensuring that project schedules are met and that the project produces the agreed upon results.

Another key role of the project supervisor is to compliment the project

*"Even the best project managers need someone with whom they can let down their hair and test ideas. And project supervisors also need a no-fault forum to express their concerns and build their understanding."*



manager's skills. If the project manager is new to the organization, the project supervisor's extensive knowledge of the organization must be communicated. A project manager who may be a strong systems person but less knowledgeable in the HR arena will depend more heavily on the project supervisor's understanding of HR functional, policy and procedural issues. No HRMS project manager, however competent, should be viewed as an island but rather as an integral part of the project management team.

### **Deliverables Workplan**

Successfully supervising an HRMS project, and for that matter managing one, should be based on a deliverables-oriented workplan for deploying resources and monitoring project progress. In such a workplan, every project task, subtask or activity has, as evidence of its completion, a specific deliverable. A deliverable may be no more than a short memorandum acknowledging receipt of training from the vendor or the minutes of a meeting at which several decisions were made. However, it is critical that progress be measureable, as either being done or not done, in the form of a concrete deliverable.

Deliverables can be evaluated not only for their completion but also for their quality. Because they are the physical evidence of task completion, other members of a project team, the project

manager and ultimately the project supervisor, where appropriate, can evaluate and contribute to the quality of each deliverable.

Deliverables, again because they are concrete, can be assigned to a specific person and that person can be held responsible for the deadline, resources used, and quality of the resulting deliverable. Deliverables that are either too large for a single person to do or which would take longer than one wishes to wait for evidence of success should be broken into smaller pieces by making a detailed outline (or technical deliverable equivalent) as the first step in producing the deliverable. Then, using the outline (or equivalent) to guide the process, the individual pieces can be assigned to different people and progress measured for each piece. With this approach, there's much less chance that a large deliverable will go off in an inappropriate direction or be otherwise flawed.

Another element in the effective supervision of a competent HRMS project manager is to plan for and conduct regularly scheduled, uninterrupted status meetings, using the deliverables-oriented workplan as a basis for the discussion. Such "sacred" status review meetings should have an agenda, minutes should be taken and issued, major milestones in the workplan should be reviewed, substantive decisions made during the review period should be reported upon and included on the agenda. The purpose of these meetings is to ensure that the project supervisor and the project manager have an open dialogue about the status of the project, and a vehicle for ensuring that misunderstandings and small problems get addressed before they threaten the project.

### **No-Fault Review**

The project manager must feel very free to discuss concerns, problems, staffing issues, i.e. the whole range of potential obstacles to this project, in a no-fault manner. Even the best project managers, who act decisively and

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make good decisions, need someone with whom they can let down their hair and test ideas. And project supervisors also need a no-fault forum to express their concerns and build their understanding.

At critical points in the project, it's important that the project supervisor conduct formal reviews of major project deliverables in an open forum that includes the appropriate review committee, project sponsors, and even potential saboteurs. Usually such a formal review will focus on a key milestone in the project, e.g. completion of a needs assessment, completion of the system test, or completion of the vendor selection process. For all such formal reviews, the material to be reviewed, i.e. the relevant agenda and deliverables, must be issued to all reviewers sufficiently in advance for them to have read and digested it in order to come prepared to the review meeting. Nothing is a bigger waste of expensive time and everyone's good will than a formal review of undigested material.

Perhaps the most important purpose of formal review meetings is that they provide an opportunity for dissenting points of view to be heard, addressed, and, wherever possible, either accommodated or won over. Even the most committed and consistent management sponsor of a major HRMS project will succumb, in the final stages of implementation, to the pressures of disgruntled peers. Therefore, include potential project saboteurs in the project planning and review process, either as members of appropriate steering committees or as friends of the family reviewers, rather than risk a ground-swell of naysaying in the critical final stages of implementation.

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## Conclusion

This article began by stating that the two critical success factors for HRMS projects are effective project management and substantial management commitment. Selecting a good project manager at the beginning of the project and establishing substantial management commitment at the same time will get the project off to a good start. However, careful attention must be paid throughout the project to sustaining management commitment and to effectively supervising even the best project manager. We cannot ignore these critical success factors at any time during the project, or we may discover that our ideal project manager has lost perspective or that the enthusiasm of our executive sponsor has faltered.

## About the Author



Naomi Bloom has more than 20 years of experience doing strategic planning for and the design, development, implementation, audit and support of financial, data analysis, administrative and especially, human resource management systems. She is experienced in resolving organizational, functional, technical and project management issues of these projects

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In addition to a number of published papers and lectures on software development and administrative systems implementation, Ms. Bloom, who holds an MBA in finance and accounting systems from Boston University, can be seen nationally on the PBS television course, "The New Literacy: An Introduction to Computers" and read quarterly in Auerbach's *Computers in Personnel*.

As managing partner of Bloom & Wallace, a Fairfax, Virginia-based systems consulting firm, Ms. Bloom espouses a pragmatic approach to combining the best analytical tools and techniques with substantial functional and industry expertise to create effective, on-time, on-budget solutions to business systems problems. Prior to forming Bloom & Wallace, Ms. Bloom was a senior principal and spent nine years with American Management Systems, Inc.

This article is adapted from material on which Ms. Bloom has lectured for various HRSP/Boston chapters and which has been addressed in her quarterly column for Auerbach's *Computers in Personnel*.

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