REPRINTED FROM PERSONNEL JOURNAL

Naomi Lee Bloom, *Bloom & Wallace, Fairfax, VA*

PERSONNEL COMPUTING

#1930

SELECT THE RIGHT MANAGER FOR SUCCESS

Of the many factors that contribute to the success of each information systems (IS) project, the most critical are top management's commitment and support, and effective project management.

Given effective project management and sustained managerial support, such important issues as functional scope, software and data architectures, budget and schedule, staffing, vendor relations and more can be resolved without jeopardizing the project.

On successful projects, these two critical factors are linked inextricably. Effective project managers rarely are attracted to (nor can they be drafted for) projects that are doomed by a lack of committed sponsors.

Projects that maintain committed (and the hope is enlightened) sponsorship, however, quickly attract the best project managers, along with the worst. Given a well-sponsored and supported project, selecting and supervising the right project manager is a top priority.

Match the Manager to the Project

For all but the smallest and least complicated IS projects, look for a renaissance person to manage the project. Essential qualities and skills include:

- Substantial, even expert, knowledge of the project's business objectives.

Project managers should be conversant with the business processes and functions, and the information model the project addresses. On large projects, the real functional experts may be lead project analysts, but the project manager still must appreciate the implications of the functional issues for other project parameters.

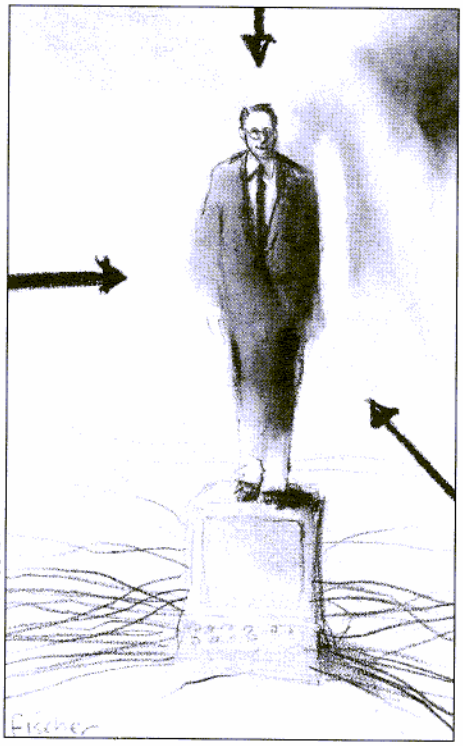

ILLUSTRATION BY HANK FISCHER

For example, if the project is inventory management and the manager candidate's prior experience was in air traffic control, reconsider selecting this person for all but the largest inventory management project. In addition, candidates who think the project is trivial compared to their other projects should be eliminated immediately.

- Authority and willingness to commit required project resources.

Although project sponsor(s) officially allocate resources and delegate authority, the project manager must deploy these resources against the work plan daily. There is no room here for indecision or vaguely worded assignments.

Each project participant must understand precisely what is expected of him or her, when specific deliverables are due and how their particular assignments fit into the overall project plan. Individual assignments vary, and the work plan itself is a living document.

The project manager, however, must be perceived at all times as acting with authority and with a willingness to accept responsibility for decisions as to the deployment of project resources.

- Ability to advise users about the system's impact.

Today's strategic IS projects do not simply automate existing procedures. The intent of these projects is to substantially change and improve the way business is conducted. As the move continues toward paperless offices, toward the use of computers for decision support, modeling and as expert systems and, most important, toward strategic product distribution and manufacturing systems, the IS project manager must be an educator as well as a public relations expert. The project manager also must be the chief spokesperson for the project with respect to how it will affect users (internal and external).

Unless these users are prepared to interact effectively with the new system, it will fail no matter how elegant its software or technical environment. For projects with considerable technical impact or that use a technical environment, that is new to the IS organization, the project manager must pay particular attention to the IS community.

Therefore, the effective project manager must have good written and oral communication skills. He or she must understand the psychology and culture of the users and be able to present the system's impact in an understandable context. In addition, the manager must recognize that this role of advising users is not a one-time formula; it is an ongoing communications process.

- Adequate technical competence to manage the IS project.

Every IS project, regardless of size or complexity, has technical implications. Except for the largest and most complex custom systems project, the project manager need not be an experienced software engineer or architect.

Even for modest, package-based implementations, however, the IS project manager must understand technical issues and how to arbitrate among alternative technical solutions. In addition, he or she must comprehend the business implications of various technologies, how to use these to the corporation's advantage and how not to be either confused or intimidated by technical staff or issues.

If the project is a substantial upgrade of a home-grown system, the manager should have a good feel for the existing system. If the project will implement a commercially available application package, then knowledge of that specific package is helpful.

If custom software development is needed, either for the system as a whole or to enhance or augment a package-based system, then a thorough understanding of the program is needed. This includes comprehension of the various tasks, tools and techniques for a modern, productive software development life cycle.

For larger, more complex projects, more systems expertise is needed to manage it. On extremely large projects, however, the team usually includes an individual who is expert on the project's technical issues. This person functions as a deputy project manager or technical team leader.

- Excellent political and people management skills.

Closely related to advising users on project impact and deploying the project's people resources is the ability to interact effectively with and guide the project team, steering committee(s), prospective users (including external users) and others who may be interested.

Expect changes in any project. Although systems projects appear to have a life of their own, they neither can ignore nor offend their cultural context. Thus, the project manager must be sensitive to that culture, aware of changes and responsive rather than reactive to the needs of the users for whom the system is being developed.

With respect to people management skills, not only the project team but many other people resources are needed to achieve success, such as the managers whose staffs must support the project while conducting their daily responsibilities. Others include the software vendor on whose product support staff the manager relies and the facilities management people whose forebearance may be needed to install 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.

THE TEAM MANAGER MUST TRAIN, COACH, LEAD, DEVELOP AND INSPIRE.

For the project team, the manager also represents line management for the duration of the project and must be able to train, coach, lead, develop and inspire these employee members.

- Proven ability to move the project forward in the face of obstacles.

Any sizable IS project encounters changes in project scope, shifting resources, staffing crises and many other predictable or unforeseen (i.e., acts of God) changes. Although he or she should not be expected to walk on water, a good project manager stays focused on the project's goals and keeps the staff working productively.

Furthermore, system sponsors, users, IS management, auditors and others should 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 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 work plan. Even acts of God (e.g., a rapacious recruiter luring away both team leaders) should not create panic in a well-managed project.

Keep the Project on Track

Although acts of God usually have considerable impact on the project's schedule, budget, team structure and so on, their effects should be understood quickly and reported to management. No IS project of any size can end successfully 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 daily activities are not disrupted unduly while these are addressed.

- Maturity to accept full project responsibility.

When asked about his or her last major systems project, an effective manager will describe the team's successes and his or her failures, not the reverse. Although all such projects must have considerable management input, the project manager must remember that committees advise and managers decide.

For those issues that are explicitly outside the authority of the project manager, a steering committee or other management group may review the project manager's recommendations and reach a decision. For most daily activities, however, the project manager should have the 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 help.

There is no substitute for hard work and occasional long hours on a successful IS project. Although a manager can

learn from analogous projects and build on past experiences, every project is a one-of-a-kind undertaking that encounters unforeseen occurrences and thorny issues.

No matter how completely a work plan is developed at the beginning of the project, it is a living document and must respond to the project's changing demands.

An inflexible project manager or one who is unable to laugh at the little inconveniences is going to wear out quickly, along with the project team. Learning to accept the unavoidable and keep the situation in perspective is critical in any IS project manager.

Managers Need Supervision

Few IS projects are managed by an individual possessing all of the previously described skills. More often, project management 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 supervisor is responsible for ensuring that schedules are met and that the project produces the agreed on results.

Another key role of this supervisor is to complement the project manager's skills. If the manager is new to the organization, the 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 functional area being addressed, depends heavily on the supervisor's understanding of functional, policy and procedural issues.

Successfully supervising and managing an IS project should be based on a deliverables-oriented work plan for deploying resources and monitoring project progress. In such a work plan, 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 vendor training or the minutes of a meeting at which several decisions were made. It is critical, however, that progress be measurable in the form of a concrete deliverable.

Deliverables not only can be evaluated for completion, but also for quality. Because they are the physical evidence of task completion, other members of a project team, the project manager and ultimately the project supervisor, can evaluate and contribute to the quality of each deliverable.

In addition, deliverables can be assigned to a specific person. That person then can be held responsible for meeting deadlines, keeping track of resources used and the quality of the resulting deliverable.

Deliverables that are either too large for one person to handle or would take a long time for evidence of success should be broken into smaller pieces. Make 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, individual pieces can be assigned to different people and progress measured for each piece. With this approach, there is much less chance that a large deliverable will go off in an inappropriate direction or otherwise be flawed.

Another element in the effective supervision of a competent IS project manager is to plan for and conduct regularly scheduled, uninterrupted status meetings. The deliverables-oriented work plan should be used as a basis for the discussion.

Such status review meetings should have an agenda, minutes should be taken, and issues and major work plan milestones should be reviewed. In addition, substantive decisions made during the review period should be reported and included on the agenda.

The purpose of these meetings is to ensure that the project supervisor and manager have an open dialogue about project status and a vehicle for ensuring that misunderstandings and small problems are addressed before they threaten the project.

The project manager must feel free to discuss concerns, problems and staffing issues — the whole range of potential obstacles to the project — in a no-fault manner. Even the best project managers need someone with whom they can talk and test ideas. Project supervisors also need a no-fault forum to express their concerns and build their understanding.

At critical points in the project, it is important that the project supervisor conduct formal reviews of major deliverables in an open forum. This meeting should include the appropriate review committee, project sponsors and even potential saboteurs.

Usually, such a formal review focuses on a key milestone in the project (e.g., completion of a needs assessment, the system test or the vendor selection process). For all such formal reviews, the material on the agenda must be issued early enough to give all those involved a chance to read and digest the information so they come to the meeting prepared. Nothing is a bigger waste of time and 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 changed. Even the most committed and consistent management sponsor of a major IS project will succumb in the final stages of implementation to the pressures of disgruntled peers.

Therefore, include potential project saboteurs in the planning and review processes. Rather than risk their opporition in the critical, final stages of implementation, make them either members of appropriate steering committees or interested friends.

Selecting the best possible manager at the beginning of the project and

establishing substantial management commitment will get the project off to a good start. Careful attention, however, must be paid throughout the project to sustaining this commitment and to effectively supervising even the best project manager.

These critical success factors cannot be ignored at any time during the project, or it may be discovered that the ideal project manager has lost perspective or that the enthusiasm of the executive sponsor has faltered. ■

Naomi Lee Bloom *has more than 20 years' experience in strategic planning for HRMS. Her most recent article for* PERSONNEL JOURNAL, *"HRMS Planning Pays Off, Down-To-Earth Strategies for Your System's Success," appeared in April 1988.*

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245 Fischer Avenue B-2
Costa Mesa, California 92626
714/751-1883
FAX: 714/751-4106