

E.J.'s Journal

Adventures in Technology

This is part 10 of an ongoing series.

BY E. J. SIWEK, CMP

Managing a project that spans months or years can be overwhelming and frustrating. Like managing a major conference, new people are always added to the project team and attrition takes people away. Recently, in a conference I was managing, I had three audio/visual contacts and two sales managers in just eight months. When managing a project involving technology, you must consider people, their processes, computers, technical knowledge and advances in technical capabilities.

During the past year, attrition has taken two people from our organization, one from logistics (shipping) and one from accounting. While these were important users of the system, their functions are one level removed from the project's critical path. However, when considering the longer-term goals for the system, these two positions are important to our ultimate success. Fortunately, the opening in our logistics area, the function closest to the critical path, was filled internally, resulting in little project delay. Also, because of an earlier design decision, processing logistical information had changed little in the new system.

The project has been more affected by the time demands on me and other members of the marketing team while we prepared for and managed a conference involving 61 world economies. This conference was a challenge because its date fell on a critical project milestone,

acceptance testing. During this phase of the project, my time should have been totally devoted to the testing effort. Instead, because of the conference, the marketing assistant and I were away from the project for four weeks. The result was that the president of our company took my place as project manager for four weeks. Obviously, this is not to be expected or even possible in other organizations. One benefit of a small company is that roles between senior directors and the president can often be so tightly intertwined that from the outside looking in, one might not even realize a role swap has been made. This can happen only when the two individuals share trust and the same vision for the project. The greater message here is not that it happened; it is that the very act underscores to the entire organization that this project has the full support and attention of the executive office.

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Overall, managing a project over a long period requires software for mapping the project's timeline. Early on, I used Microsoft Project for mapping milestone dates. More recently, we have relied on software provided by our contracted development team and on the coordination of their project director for maintaining the overall flow of the project activities.

Each week, we have a conference call to review issues and to adjust the rollout plan. With OverQuota®, two internal databases are supplied to help coordinate and communicate overall project management issues. One database, Team Talks, is used to provide internal team members a conduit for reporting coding errors and successes as well as for stating additional needs. Each night when our system is replicated, copies of the updated Team Talks database are sent to all members of the project team.

During our weekly conference calls, we review these comments and either delegate development responsibility or place a request in a "parking lot" for future consideration. Using a parking lot ensures that the outside development team will not automatically spend programming resources on what may be frivolous user requests rather than true process needs. Delegating assignments based on coding complexity allows best use of resources. Obviously, things that can be done with in-house resources have no budget considerations. However, those assigned to the contracted development team will have immediate budget considerations.

The second database supplied to us was the project status database, designed for the development team. In this data-

base, all items relating to the project plan, budget, critical development documents and status are maintained and communicated between team members.

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This data focuses entirely on coding problems and development needs. It is accessible by all development team members. It quickly became the first database opened each day to check project updates, questions or areas needing resource re-allocation.

The functionality of both the Team Talks and project status databases are essential to maintaining focus over a period of time. Best of all, for us, these were turnkey solutions, so no additional time had to be invested for managing the overall project. Collectively, they have served as the electronic filing cabinet and communications conduit throughout the project's duration.

Next month we look at training and turning the system on for the first time. The light at the end of the tunnel is finally in sight. ▲



E.J. SIWEK, CMP, is director of marketing for Excel Partnership, based in Sandy Hook, Conn. He is also president of Flashpoint Technologies, LLC, in Bethel,

Conn. Send comments and questions related to this column to publications@mpiweb.org.