PRACTICAL IT

with **Oscar Murray**

The Critical Questions

I WONDER...

► How much do you spend on your shipping system?

► Do you feel like you are getting the most bang for your buck?

► Does your IT department have projects on hold that you submitted over a year ago?

► So... how do smart people fall behind when it comes to project implementation?

If these are questions you have wondered about, then this article will really hit home.

No matter what size company you have, you will always have a need for increased functionality. In an organization, there is always at least one person, if not many, constantly submitting new ideas. With all these requests, how do you know which projects to do first, and what is the scope of each project?

Scope is why a lot of projects either never get finished or end up costing way more than initially planned. The reason for this is a concept called scope creep, when items not in the original plan somehow make it into the project. When you have a new request for a project submitted, you need to do a quick analysis of that request. Items to ask yourself: do you understand the request, and do you have enough information to make a decision to table the request or to add the request to the queue of requests? If you drop it, make sure to add this to your historical assets so that you know why this was dropped and can refer future similar requests to this historical asset.

Once you go through the justification and the project charter, you need to make sure you have a good scope management plan. A lot of companies do not have any formal scope management, but you should have a standard process to make sure you understand the deliverables, which are how you know the project is done. For example, take a request to add more finance reporting. The finance team says it needs reports and gives you an example of some of the types of reports needed. Most people would go through creating those reports and presenting those reports to the finance team. You can imagine what happens next: the reports are not complete or they need more fields or some more report types altogether. So you thought you were finished, but there is still work to be done.

You can really get bogged down with managing scope this way. Say an enthusiastic programmer is working on one of the new reports. He starts doing it and finds out that this report is outdated, so he decides to add some new functionality that he learned a few months earlier. The programmer thinks it will only take a little longer, but the report is so much better. When the project manager gets all the reports from the programmers and gives them to the finance team, they ask why one is so much better than the rest... and can they get all the reports to look like this?

The bottom line is this: If you clearly define the scope of the project to include as much detail as possible and have the requester sign off on this detailed scope document, you will be much better off. In our scenario, you would now have a tool that shows what was agreed upon and that any major changes at this point would have to be implemented as a new project.

If you continually work this process, you and the submitters will get better at it and work out ways to minimize last-minute changes through project change management processes. Spending a little extra time defining the scope and letting the project initiator sign off on the project scope will save you time and money — and we could all use that. ∎

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