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TECHNIQUES FOR PROJECT INITIATION

Part One – Getting Started

Getting Started

Perhaps the hardest part of the project planning process is getting started. Certainly, overcoming inertia will usually contribute to the problem. And then, there's always the problem of getting some relief from your other duties. But, the major cause of difficulty and procrastination is the lack of a framework for engaging in the process and developing the plan itself.

To start with, you will want to address the crucial identification of project objectives, constraints, and stakeholders. Then you will need to move on to organizing for the project and development of the project team. This team will participate in the development of a strategy for achieving the project objectives, and the clarification of the role of the various project stakeholders. The team will then proceed to the development of a framework for the work scope, timing, and budgeting aspects of the project. These will include Work Breakdown Structures (WBS), Organizational Breakdown Structures (OBS), structures for cost accounting, and Project Milestone Schedules.

It is not unusual to seriously falter at this project initiation stage. We don't quite know where, and how to start. Some project managers will put the process off until it's too late to develop a plan of their own choosing, getting stuck, instead, with a plan that is by now doomed to failure from the start. Other project managers attempt to produce a quick schedule, or a resource plan, or an expenditure plan (budget), or perhaps all three. What they soon find out is that they don't have all of the answers that they need, and that their plans are full of holes. That is, indeed, the nature of the beast. In most cases, the project planning process starts off with a set of assumptions, and the project planning process is used to validate these assumptions. Rather than putting off the planning process until the missing pieces are found, the smart project manager uses the process to help generate the missing data.

Obviously, there is a lot of front-end work that must be executed prior to establishing the project schedule, resource plan and budget. And, contrary to popular thought, a good deal of this effort does not involve the use of the computer. At this point, the project manager would do well to consider the following course of action:

- Examine the objectives for this project and the various constraints that impact upon these objectives.
- Identify the project stakeholders and how they, too, will impinge upon those objectives.
- Develop a project strategy that will support the project objectives and stakeholders, while meeting the various constraints.

- Put together a project team and other required resources, and evaluate what limits they impose on the execution of the project within time and budget constraints.
- Eventually, the PM has to implement a planning and control procedure that can support the needs of the project while being able to be supported by the project team.

Defining Project Objectives

A project plan is a **blueprint** of how one intends to achieve the objectives of a project. In several aspects, it is not that different from a building drawing. To prepare such a drawing, the architect must focus on the purpose and use of the building, amass conceptual data, develop outlines, and conduct certain technical and cost inquiries. Once prepared, and approved by the owner, the drawing serves as the guide for the construction of the building. We can view a project plan in a similar light.
It naturally follows, therefore, that the very first item of order, in this planning process, is to make sure that the project objectives are perfectly clear, and are defined in terms that can be used to develop the project plan. An inseparable part of this process is the identification of the constraints associated with the project.
The project objectives typically cover a number of elements, for example; time objectives, budget objectives, technical objectives, and scope objectives. Let's consider, for instance, a banking group that has decided to develop a new computer-based transaction processing system:

- **Technical objectives**--such as volume of transactions, turnaround time, ease-of-use, and error handling.
- **Timing objectives**--such as initial implementation of the system, system cutover, and operator training.
- **Budget objectives**--such as total system cost, operating cost ($ per transaction), and equipment costs.
- **Scope guidelines**--such as type of transactions to be processed, equipment to be used, locations involved, communications, and training.

All of these must be clearly identified before the project planning can commence in earnest.

Constraints would include:

- Time constraints
- Technology constraints
- Personnel constraints
- Cultural constraints
- Money constraints

These too, must be clearly identified at the outset. This set of project objectives and project constraints will serve as the basis for identifying and evaluating risks, as well as the platform for developing the project strategy.

The Project Charter

Although often omitted from the project process, there should be a formal project authorization practice. This is best instituted by means of a "**Project Charter**" document. The Project Charter should contain much of the early description of project content, objectives and budget. It is both a starting point for the project initiation process and the basis for the strategic planning and plan validation that takes place at this time. It specifies the project sponsor, the intended benefits and benefactors, and the source of funding. The lack of a Project Charter will potentially lead to conflict and confusion.
The Project Charter may exist under several titles. It may be called a project scoping document, or the project authorization. It may contain parts of the project estimate, project proposal, or project contract. It should contain information about who can charge time to the project and what charge numbers to use. It must identify, in addition to the sponsor; all lead personnel and decision makers.
The exact shape and form of the Project Charter is up to each organization. But do make sure that there is one.

Article Series Segments

- *Part One:* *Getting Started*
- Part Two: Project Strategies
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- Part Four: Project Frameworks
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