

The 'Human' Reasons for Project Delays



Project delays – hated by all involved as they mean the risk of not delivering the total project on time and also mean higher costs. As Project Managers, we are trained to seek these out and eliminate them whenever possible.

To identify the contributing delays, everything must be considered – logistical delays, technical delays, and human delays. We have pretty good training on identifying the logistical and technical delays. There are sophisticated software tools that can analyze the net contribution of each identified delay on the project cost and schedule – giving you a rank order of what delays should be worked on. Where our training and tools frequently fall down is in the human delays area.

I worked with a client not long ago who was trying to determine the optimal project schedule for rolling out new web-based products. The client had a standard project work process and schedule for their rollouts that consistently took 12 weeks to deliver. However, they had a demand from their VP that they deliver the next project in 9 weeks – a 3-week gap to close. As I put their project schedule template into a schedule/cost risk analysis tool, I asked the team for the top delays to their schedule. As the team brainstormed out the reasons for the delay, one team member named Sam emphatically said, 'No – none of those items are really it. It is Legal – they are the entire reason that we are late. If they just would get off of their butts and do their jobs, we would be able to deliver our projects much faster. It should only take them a little bit of time, but it always takes them 5 days just for an approval.' While his team pointed out that even if Legal could deliver instantaneously there would still be a 2-week gap, he was adamant that they were the main delay.

We completed modeling their project schedule in the analysis tool and then looked at the results. There was a 50% chance that the project was going to take at least 11 weeks and if the VP wanted a higher probability of accomplishment then an additional 2 weeks was going to have to be added to the schedule. The length of time it took to deliver the schedule had to do with how the work was put together – they could shorten the time, but activities would have to be done in parallel not in series – increasing the complexity and risk in the project plan.

With that as input, we completed the analysis and looked at the drivers – what were the activities that really were contributing to the end project delivery date. When the list was displayed, the Legal activity wasn't in the top 25. As I explained to Sam – this didn't mean that the Legal activity wasn't important and wasn't a pain, it just meant that it wasn't as important, in terms of driving the project end date, as 25 other activities – due to their length and the logic of where they fell in the project plan. Sam then said, 'I get it', got up, and left the room.

Sam came back 45 minutes later, sat down, and said, 'You aren't going to believe this. I realized that I had been verbally beating up the attorney for months – believing that he was the reason that we weren't delivering the projects on time. When I realized that wasn't true, I left the room – found him and apologized for being such a jerk. The attorney accepted my apology and then confessed that the legal activity did only take 1 day to complete. The extra 4 days were added on because I was such a jerk. He now promised me that the legal review would only take 1 day vs. 5 days from here on out.'

This is the real world of project management – where because someone is a jerk, or because of an unresolved conflict a phone call doesn't get promptly returned – all leading to those 4 extra days. Identifying the technical problems are frequently more obvious and easier to solve than the human problems. To identify the human problems and then come up with solutions requires a completely different set of skills. Make sure you, and your team, have the complete set of skills – so that you can identify all of the problems (technical and human), solve the real problems, and optimize your project delivery.



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The legal activity really only takes 1 day to complete – the extra 4 days were added in because I was such a jerk.