Caution: Small Project Ahead

Detour at Your Own Peril

It's three o'clock on a Friday afternoon and you are already thinking of the weekend. The manager of your Project Management Office stops by your desk and hands you a project folder with the words, "Don't worry, it's a small project." Rather than putting you at ease, this is a phrase that should immediately put you on your guard.

Managing a small project is challenging. Why? Because you were probably assigned the project in addition to your other 'real' project(s). This small project may not even be in your area of expertise, but the thinking is that this is acceptable because it is a 'small' project.

What is a small project? One that takes less than three months in duration to complete. Two or three people working for less than three months can only burn so many man hours. As a result, budgets on small projects are typically tight, and there is little or no margin for error in either the upfront work associated with estimating the project or in its delivery.

A common misconception associated with delivering small projects is that the perceived amount of risk is low, and therefore the amount of time that is spent working on that project is minimized, often to the detriment of the project and its stakeholders. But be warned: just because the perceived risk is small, does not mean that it is. (Witness a small change to a web service that cripples a mission-critical application.) Another common expectation is that because the project is small in terms of dollars and resources with a short duration, it should be easy to implement. With a typically fixed, short timeline, plus limited dollars and resources, this is seldom the case.

With these constraints the temptation is strong to cut corners when it comes to delivering a small project. This is a fatal error. Why? Policies and procedures were put into place for a reason. You may need to follow the exception process to some of those policies and procedures, but it is important that your project still follows the applicable standards.

Resources

You may find yourself scrambling for resources because small projects do not command people's attention. Typically the people you need are very busy. They promise to squeeze your work in tomorrow, but tomorrow never comes. So, how can you combat this tendency?

Negotiate to get the time you need, hold them to deadlines, enlist the project stakeholders to raise the priority of your project, and perhaps offer baked goods.

Budget

Project dollars are usually fixed. Therefore you will need to be extremely aggressive in managing your project's scope because your project budget cannot bear any extra work. Because of the small project size, it probably did not receive the same level of rigor in the estimating that a larger, more complex project would. As a result, once in the project you may well find that your budget is not what is needed to successfully implement it. Engage the stakeholders and be persistent to get the dollars you need.

Schedule

On a small project the schedule is always tight. If the project schedule does slip by even a few days, it usually results in missing the deadline simply because there is so little margin for error. The downside of a missed deadline on a small project can be large to your reputation. Why can't you deliver such a small project on time and budget? If you cannot deliver a project of this scope, how can you be entrusted with a larger and more complex project?

If you have been assigned a small project or a series of them, take heart. This is actually an excellent opportunity to hone your project management skills. Aggressively manage scope to preserve your budget. Improve your negotiating skills to get the resources you need, when you need them. Trust your instincts to escalate issues as soon as they arise. Remember, a delay of even a few days can jeopardize your deadline. Avoid the temptation to cut corners and skip steps and follow all policies and procedures. With these cautions in mind, that Friday afternoon folder can be another success story in your résumé.

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