

Software Implementation: Why Project Management is Important for Government Agencies (Regardless of Size)

How we got there

It's an all-too familiar scenario: A vendor has been contracted to provide some type of software package, there have been months of delays followed by a move to terminate the contract by your agency. Now you've lost months (or even years!), you're still using your old system, and are no doubt considering the possibility of building one yourself, even though that option was rejected initially as being too expensive and taking too long. It's easy for each side to point at one another and try to play the 'pin the blame' game. Unfortunately, fixing the blame doesn't fix the problems. A well thought out approach to project management before selecting a vendor may keep this scenario from happening to you.

Why Project Management?

Project management performs a relatively simple task: Documenting reasonable and mutually agreed upon deliverables within mutually agreed upon time frames, and then communicating progress, success and problems on a regular basis. It's not rocket science. Unfortunately, many agencies are intimidated by the thought of having to 'manage the project'. Even if you are a small agency (actually, it's even more important if you're small), project management performs an absolutely critical task in having your project become a success.

Assume that you are beginning a software implementation project. Consider what makes a project fail: The vendor didn't understand what you needed, You had a law change and had to change things mid-course, The vendor provided buggy code, Your leadership changed and lost interest in the project. There are many scenarios that can pop up and take your project off-track.

Let's look at each of these scenarios and examine how effective project management could help.

The vendor just doesn't understand!

This one is pretty simple...If you communicate and document to the vendor what it is exactly that you need, and they agree to provide it, there are no excuses. The trick here is the 'document' part. Depending upon the complexity of your project, you may need to dedicate a fair amount of time to documenting precisely what it is you want. Later in the article some examples of how to effectively document what you need will be given.

The law changed!

Planning for the unexpected is an important part of project management, and it isn't really as hard as you might think. Obviously, it isn't always possible to plan for the unexpected. The easiest way to think about it is to consider Murphy's law. When Murphy inevitably raises his head over your project, what's the worst he could do? Plan for that. Consider what options you can take at every critical junction of your project. Just the process of thinking about where failure is most likely can help you in deciding what the best course is up front, before the project even starts.

The vendor gave us buggy code!

Part of project management is documenting what will be done when things don't work right. If software is being written for you, it WILL have bugs. Plan for that, and come to a mutually agreed upon course of action with your vendor in advance.

The boss left!

Government, by its very nature, has turnover, particularly in the technical side. When elected officials change, so do people, priorities and budgets. Plan for that inevitability. Find a project sponsor who is passionate about it, and who is unlikely to leave your agency. This person needs to be in a position where they can set priorities and budgets (within reason, of course). If you don't have a cheerleader, your team is going to lose.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

Communication is the single most important factor in successful project management. Even if there is nothing to report, communication needs to occur, just so that everyone involved in the project doesn't get out of the habit of doing it. Develop a standard within which you will communicate. It can be informal for some issues, formal for others. For example, a weekly telephone call with the vendor may suffice for non-critical no-news-is-good-news reports. Written weekly reports may be necessary for larger projects. In larger projects, face-to-face meetings at critical path times are a good idea. For example, your project is about to go into production. That is a time when you want to look into the eyes of the vendor's project team and make sure everyone is on the same page.

Written project requirements are key to setting the basis for clear communication and a successful project. Before any vendors are involved, your agency needs to decide what the project will entail, and determine the detail of the requirements document. It is a good idea to involve the end-users of the new system in this process, as they have insights that no one else will. For particularly large or complex projects, it may be necessary to contract the requirements documentation out to a vendor. If you do that, remember that this phase of your project should be managed just like any other.

When documenting project requirements, identify what is important to document and what is not. Over-documenting can raise the cost of your project. For example, if you document how every computer screen must look, or how every report must look, you are guaranteeing that the vendor will have to custom-write software, which will have a huge impact on your project cost. Be

willing to be flexible (within reason, of course) and your costs will be lower and your project is more likely to be successful since you will be able to make use of proven technology.

Defining what determines project success is also very important. Create a list of quantifiable criteria which can be tested, and then plan to test at different points in the project. These tests are the objective criteria you can use to identify if your project is on-track. Be sure that your tests aren't subject to interpretation. Everyone (the vendor and you) need to have a clear understanding of what success is, since that's really what everyone wants.

But We've Always Done it That Way!

Every agency has processes that have been in place for years and will need to be addressed in any automation project. Keep in mind that some things aren't suited for automation, and the reason "but we've always done it that way" isn't a good reason to automate a process. Change can be difficult, and planning for change is an important part of your project as well.

Define Your Roles

Before the project starts, everyone in your agency involved in the project needs to have a clear understanding of what their responsibilities are. Communicate with the vendor who is responsible for what. For example, the vendor will need to know who is the project manager, the network manager, the server manager and the project sponsor. You will need to know who on the vendor's side is responsible for what as well. It is a good idea to request a list of the vendor's project participants and their roles as a part of the bid process.

Have Fun!

Attitude is how you can keep yourself from getting ulcers over the project. If you have done your planning, are communicating effectively, have picked the best vendor for your project and have the right people in the right roles from your agency, then your project can't help but succeed. Remember that, relax, and enjoy the process. Not everyone gets the opportunity to manage a project, so take pride in your accomplishment.