



Project Management (Part 7) - Managing Your Project to Success

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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Project Management (Part 7) - Managing Your Project to Success

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Module 1

Tracking Progress and Maintaining Control

In This Module

- ▶ Keeping track of how the project plan compares to actual performance
 - ▶ Using information systems to track scheduling, work effort, and expenditures
 - ▶ Implementing your control process and taking corrective actions
 - ▶ Managing changes responsibly
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A sad reality for many projects is that although they're born accompanied by high hopes and expectations, they die amid frustration and disappointment. Your project plans represent visions that you believe will work; however, those plans don't implement themselves automatically, and they can't predict the future with certainty.

Successful projects require continued care and management to ensure that they follow their plans correctly and, in turn, produce the desired results. When unexpected situations occur, you, as the project manager, must react promptly to adjust your efforts and keep your project on track.

This module discusses the steps in the project control process and focuses on the systems and techniques you can use to collect, analyze, and report on schedule performance, labor hours, and expenditures, as well as the processes for and dealing with change requests and taking corrective actions when needed.

Holding On to the Reins: Project Control

Project control entails the following activities, which you perform throughout your project to ensure that it proceeds according to plan and produces the desired results (see the Appendix for a flowchart illustrating the cyclical nature of project control):

- ✓ **Reconfirm the plan.** At the beginning of each performance period, reaffirm with team members the following project responsibilities and commitments they made for the coming period:
 - Activities they agreed to perform
 - Dates they agreed they will start and end these activities
 - Amount of person effort they agreed they'll need to perform these activities
- ✓ **Assess performance.** During the performance period, have team members record information on the following:
 - Completed intermediate and final deliverables
 - Dates they reached milestones
 - Dates they started and ended activities
 - Number of hours they worked on each activity

- Amount of nonpersonnel resources they used for each activity
- Expenditures they made for each activity

Collect this information at the end of the performance period, compare it with the plan, and determine the reasons for any differences.

- ✓ **Take corrective action.** If necessary, take steps to bring your project's performance back into conformance with your plans, or if doing so isn't possible, change the plans to reflect new expectations.
- ✓ **Keep people informed.** Share your achievements, problems, and future plans with your project's audiences.



Tip

Choose the periods for monitoring your project's performance based on the overall length of the project, the risk of unexpected occurrences, and your proximity to major milestones. Although you may choose to monitor selected project activities on a daily basis in certain situations, plan to assess your project's overall performance at least once a month to identify promptly any unexpected occurrences or performance problems that must be addressed.

Initially, you may be uncomfortable reconfirming commitments people have made for an upcoming performance period because you feel doing so

- ✓ **Suggests that you don't trust the person:** After all, the person has made a commitment to do the specified work; wouldn't she tell you if she were unable to live up to that commitment?
- ✓ **Increases the likelihood that she'll say she can't live up to the original promise:** You're concerned that raising the topic may actually encourage her to say she can't honor her commitments.

In most cases, however, neither situation proves to be true. Why? Because of the following two reasons:

- ✓ Raising the issue doesn't suggest a lack of trust; if you didn't trust the person, you wouldn't talk to her at all! Checking in with her reflects your understanding that she may not have had a chance to tell you about new circumstances that make it difficult to honor her commitments.
- ✓ Raising the issue doesn't increase the chances that she'll opt out of a commitment; it buys you time. If the person can't perform according to her promises, you'll find that out at the end of the performance period anyway — when she hasn't finished the work. So taking time to reconfirm actually provides an entire performance period to develop alternative ways of dealing with her new restrictions.



Remember

When a person reaffirms her existing commitments for the upcoming performance period, the chances are greater that she'll perform her assignments successfully, on time, and within budget. If she's unable to honor the commitments she made previously (for example, if she has unexpectedly been assigned to work on another high-priority effort during the same time period), you can work with her to develop new plans for how and when she will complete her assignment for your project.

Establishing Project Management Information Systems

A *project management information system* (PMIS) is a set of procedures, equipment, and other resources for collecting, analyzing, storing, and reporting information that describes project performance. A PMIS contains the following three parts:

- ✓ **Inputs:** Raw data that describe selected aspects of project performance
- ✓ **Processes:** Analyses of the data that compare actual performance with planned performance
- ✓ **Outputs:** Reports that present the results of the analyses

Designing a PMIS not only requires that you define which data to collect during the project but also that you specify how to collect the data, who collects it, when they collect it, and how they enter the data into the system. All these factors can affect the timeliness and accuracy of the data and, therefore, of your project performance assessments.

To support your ongoing management and control of the project, you need to collect and maintain information about schedule performance, work effort, and expenditures. The following sections tell you how to collect, analyze, and report on these three parts of your project's performance.



Remember

Many information systems have the technical support of computers, scanners, printers, and plotters. But an information system can consist of manual processes and physical storage devices, as well. For example, you can record project activities in your notebook or calendar and keep records of project budgets in your file cabinet. However, you still need to monitor your procedures for collecting, storing, analyzing, and reporting your information; they affect the accuracy and timeliness of your performance assessments.

The clock's ticking: Monitoring schedule performance

Regularly monitoring your project's schedule performance can provide early indications of possible activity-coordination problems, resource conflicts, and cost overruns that may occur in the future. The following sections show you what information you need in order to monitor schedule performance, how to collect and evaluate it, and how to ensure its accuracy.

Defining the schedule data to collect

Your project's *Work Breakdown Structure* (WBS) is a deliverable-oriented decomposition of the work required to produce your project's deliverables. The lowest level of detail of each branch of the WBS is a *work package*, and each work package, in turn, is composed of *activities* (pieces of work performed during the project).

You can describe an activity's schedule performance either by noting the dates it began and ended or by describing how much of it has been done (in other words, *percent completed*).

If you choose to describe your project's schedule performance by noting the status of individual activities, collect either or both of the following data items to support your analyses:

- ✓ The start and end dates for each activity in your project
- ✓ The dates when milestones (such as *contract signed*, *materials received*, or *environmental test completed*) are reached



Warning

Be careful if you decide to use percent completed to indicate an activity's progress because most often you have no clear way to determine this percentage. For example, saying that your new product design is 30 percent complete is virtually meaningless because you can't determine objectively how much of the thinking and creating is actually done. Suggesting that you have completed 30 percent of your design because you have expended 30 of the 100 hours budgeted for the task or because three of the ten days allotted for its performance have passed is equally incorrect. The first indicator is a measure of resource use, and the second is a measure of time elapsed. Neither measure indicates the amount of substantive *work* completed.

On the other hand, if your activity has the same amount of time and effort, you may be able to determine the amount of work completed. For example, if you have 10 people and you have completed 30 percent of the work, you have 3 people and you have

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