The Importance of a Realistic Schedule

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Too many projects are driven by an optimistic schedule. That is, a schedule where the probability of meeting the end date with an acceptable quality product is very low. Then, poorly planned attempts to meet optimistic dates result in unnecessary problems which not only cause dates to slip, sometimes uncontrollably, but also compromise quality. In this first of a two part article, we will look at why a good schedule is so important, why project managers create unrealistic schedules, and what the impact of an unrealistic schedule might be. Then, in the second part we’ll look at an approach called Schedule Centered Planning which will help you to deal with these issues.

Why focus on the schedule?

While a project plan contains more than just a schedule, the schedule is arguably the most important aspect of that plan. For the project team, the schedule defines what they need to do and when they need to do it. Outside of the project team, it is the most visible element of the plan, and many consider it to be the plan.

The project team is tasked with creating the end product of the project. The schedule, developed with their input, lays out how they, as a team, are to go about creating it. It should reflect project priorities, the best sequence, and the integration of all of the work of the individual contributors. As we will see, a good schedule will have a lot to do with the delivery date, and not just by predicting that date. It will also impact the final quality of the end product. And, the project is really not over until the customer is satisfied with the quality of the product.

Management needs to know the key milestones, especially the completion date of the project. Then they set customers expectations – when can each customer expect to receive promised deliverables. Customers, in turn, may need to know this as it drives their schedules. (How many times have you had your schedule disrupted when a promised delivery from an outside vendor is late?) With realistic schedules, customer expectations on timing, quality and scope can be met; with optimistic schedules, unrealistic expectations result in disappointed customers.

Many organizations create a roadmap of future projects and use this to set long term goals, which are also shared with customers so they can do their long term planning. In fact, the roadmap frequently reflects the needs of key customers; meeting those needs can be very important in a competitive environment. Still, the roadmap is driven by the availability of the necessary resources. So it’s important to know when those resources will be available; that is, when will they complete their current assignments. Again, this requires realistic schedules. Thus your current schedule not only sets your customers’ near term expectations, it also drives the roadmap which sets their long term expectations.

How does all this come together?

Figure 1 clearly shows the importance of having a realistic schedule. And, when an organization has multiple, concurrent projects supporting multiple customers, each schedule is even more important. When multiple schedules fall apart, the result can be chaos.
Figure 1. The importance of a realistic schedule

Four dreaded words that most project managers hear all too often are: “we need it by . . .” Frequently the imposed schedule is established before the scope is understood and the project team is selected. Sometimes the deadline is very real, and if so, it will be accompanied by a good explanation of why the date is important. If you’re doing a demo for a trade show, even a day late is not good enough. Here you must know what is most important so when the date rolls around you have something useful you can provide. Other times, the imposed date is just a misguided effort to put pressure on the project team so they don’t take any longer than is necessary. When we walk through the impact of an unrealistic schedule, we’ll see why this is misguided.

Even when dates are not dictated, some stakeholders pressure the project manager to provide an end date before there is enough time to properly plan. Again, you may be forced to create a schedule before you’ve had time to fully understand the scope or identify who will be working on your project. Worse, if the stakeholders don’t like the date, you will be pressured to pull it in. Then you must waste valuable time iterating on a schedule that does not reflect the ultimate reality of your project.

Imposed dates and unrealistic stakeholder pressure is not the only causes of prematurely providing schedule dates which might not be realistic. If you manage large complex projects, identifying the scope is a lot like peeling an onion: you don’t know if the current layer is the last, and you don’t know what surprises might be uncovered when it is removed. Until you understand the scope, you don’t know if you have all of the needed skills. In new product development I have seen the early inception phase go on for months. Unfortunately, when it takes time for the team to fully understand the scope, you are faced with a dilemma: you need the time to generate reasonable dates, while stakeholders have a legitimate need to know. So planning cannot extend indefinitely. As project manager you need to know when you’ve reached a point of diminishing returns, and add contingency for what you don’t yet know. Experience and a good historical database are most important here. A novice project manager may need the support of the experienced project managers.
Finally, failure to properly plan really crosses over all of the above. If you just give in to pressures of people, time or complexity, you are failing to properly plan. If you create a schedule that does not reflect your project risks or the quality of the end product, you are failing to plan. If your schedule does not reflect procurement approval and lead times, you are failing to plan. The paradox is, this will only create worse pressure as the project progresses, especially near the end. I would rather work longer hours up front to create a reasonable schedule then to work long hours in the end trying to manage something that might not be manageable. That is, the planning will end, while a poorly planned project can go on for a very long time.

**What is the impact of an Unrealistic Schedule?**

When an unrealistic schedule is published, there is a lot of pressure on the project team to try to meet it. If unrealistic schedules are not a chronic problem, then, if the current schedule represents a real need and the schedule is not too unrealistic, many project teams will do what is necessary. These are fun projects to manager as the energy level is high, the team really gels, and for all there is a significant accomplishment.

Unfortunately, unrealistic schedules frequently are a chronic problem, and it’s easy to see why they can become so:

- pressure to meet dates forces team members to take shortcuts
- shortcuts result in defects
- finding and fixing the defects pushes out the end date
- resource availability is delayed, delaying the start of the next project
- more pressure is put on the project team of the next project
- customers find defects in the delivered product
- team members must multitask fixing customer defects on delivered products while working on the current project
- etc.

Figure 2 shows how this plays out. Resources are not freed up when planned so the timeframe is wrong or it must be pushed out. Team members spend time fixing the defects on other project, so resource availability is less than needed, and may even be highly uncertain. If the schedule was realistic to begin with, it will become unrealistic; if it was unrealistic it will become even more unrealistic. Promises made to customers will become empty, but there will be pressure to keep those promises and this will further compromise quality.

Thus we have a vicious cycle: late resources, part time resources and cutting corners to save time become chronic; poor quality becomes chronic; and there is little hope of getting back to realistic schedules. In the end, customers’ expectations will not be met so they will not be happy. Needless to say, the roadmap will cease to be meaningful. And the schedule ceases to be a tool for projecting ahead to the future, which is the primary purpose of the schedule!
Figure 2. The problem of chronic unrealistic schedules.

Now we know why project managers create unrealistic schedules, and we also know the havoc unrealistic schedules can wreak when they become a chronic problem. What can you do? The proper answer is that you must do your due diligence up front. It will require work – there’s no getting around that! But, you can work smarter. In the next installment we’ll look at an approach called Schedule Centered Planning which is based on the fact that a meaningful schedule must reflect your entire project plan.

Vincent McGevna has over 25 years of engineering project management experience, managing cross-functional engineering and manufacturing teams developing software, electronics and mechanical hardware for the semiconductor, aerospace, telecommunications, nuclear power, and TV industries.

Vince has been using Microsoft Project for almost 20 years, and is an expert in the use of Project as a planning tool.

The Schedule Centered Planning approach evolved while Vince was managing many challenging projects. It is not radically new, but it is unique since it focuses on the fact that a properly created schedule must reflect all other aspects of planning. During this time, his use of Microsoft Project evolved and expanded to make it a useful, stand-alone project management tool.

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