

Project Control – Addressing the Challenges

How well do organizations perform project control? Not very well according to recent surveys. Standish Group's latest "Chaos" report states that only 28% of IT projects are deemed a complete success. This figure is rather alarming for organizations trying to increase organizational value through the completion of strategic projects.

How can you turn this around? Many organizations look to improve their project control efforts. To better understand this lets first review the basics.

Controlling process and functions

Controlling is essentially tracking and managing the core project management elements of scope, quality, time and cost. The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) identifies the core controlling processes as:

- Integration change control;
- Scope change control and scope verification;
- Schedule control;
- Risk monitoring and control;
- Quality control;
- Cost control (e.g. variance analysis); and
- Project progression and performance reporting.

Foundation for project control

Effective project control is used to deliver timely information allowing managers to take corrective measures to keep the project on track. Project control monitors/compares planned objectives, risks, schedules and budgets against what is actually being delivered. The foundation of these planned metrics is derived from the original business analysis identifying the project requirements. Flaws in the business analysis will directly equate to major challenges and variances in the project.

Challenges

Most organizations effectively:

- Track and analyze costs (in isolation)
- Review and track schedules (in isolation)
- Document project status

Most organizations are challenged in the areas of:

- Assessing project status in terms of completed deliverables not just cost incurred
- Ongoing review of identified risk (original risk assessment often gathers dust!)
- Issue management (separate from risk management)
- Quality control
- Change control
- Educating and coaching of the project team around project management practice

Addressing the challenges

A good starting point is to embrace project control as a formal discipline. This involves educating teams and providing the necessary tools to collect and compare the project information. Some organizations even provide incentives to reduce project variances.

Project Managers need to learn to manage the critical path, and to protect the critical path through the use of project buffers and by developing a better understanding of how constraints impact project schedules. PMO's can help teams identify specific learning and development activities as they relate to project skills (e.g. estimating techniques).

Organizations should improve project governance through regular project audits and regular quality and risk assessments. The frequency and depth of these should be based on the overall risk rating of the project or portfolio of projects.

PMO's should keep issue logs and databases up-to-date. They should create guidelines for communication and authorization of issues resolution. Service levels should be established for resolving issues and processing scope changes.

Finally, put the correct amount of emphasis on project control, it can be the difference between success and failure. It is not unusual in large complex projects to have a full-time project control analyst supporting a project manager. Think about expanding this role to control not only individual projects, but logical groupings of projects (programs) or your entire portfolio of projects. There is growing evidence that this role can improve project quality while also potentially allowing your senior project managers to take on more projects in parallel.

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