

# Avoiding Project Failure – It's Not Rocket Science

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It is true that every project is unique; however the underlying causes of project failure are usually restricted to a few specific areas. Once we know what these are we can take steps to minimise the chance of problems in these areas and increase the likelihood of success.

## Poor Project Initiation

The Problem:

This is probably the most common pitfall. Not initiating a project properly with sufficient time spent to define and agree the user requirements, create a realistic plan and gain buy-in from all of the stakeholders means you're almost certainly destined for problems.

The Solution:

Resist the temptation to start the project too early before it has been properly initiated. Don't allow the customer to push you into starting the work on the assumption that it will result in an earlier delivery. The reality is that poor initiation extends projects by causing rework, errors and omissions. Just say no when pushed and never start too early.

## Weak Ongoing Project Management

The Problem:

It's no good doing a thorough job of planning and initiating a project if you don't manage it effectively to its conclusion. Typical problems here are scope creep, poor work-plan, lack of change control, poor communication and poor management of risks and issues.

The Solution:

1. Introduce a change control process and make everyone aware of it. Use it to ensure that the resources stay focused on delivering what is important.
2. Practice exception reporting.
3. Communicate on a regular basis with your sponsor and other key stakeholders.
4. Update your plan regularly. If you don't intend to update the plan then it's not worth creating in the first place.

## Insufficient Resources

The Problem:

Not having the right amount of resource or indeed having the right amount with the wrong skill mix can be a cause of project failure.

The Solution:

Insist that management provide appropriate resources either from internal staff or if necessary by hiring some on a contract basis.

## Lifecycle Problems

The Problem:

There are many occasions during the lifecycle of a project for issues that may lead to failure. Examples of these include:

- Failure to define the requirements clearly, resulting in expectations not being met
- Cutting edge or new technology that causes unforeseen problems
- A poor technical design preventing the solution from being changed or scaled in the future
- Poor change control allowing change requests to cause the project to drift
- Changing priorities diverting attention away from core work
- Poor testing leading to bugs and errors later in the project

The Solution:

All of these issues and many others should be considered at the start of the project. A good approach is to brainstorm the possible issues with your team or other project managers who have run similar projects. Some solutions for the examples above include:

- Employing a business analyst to draw out the user requirements and document them in a clear concise way
- Asking if it is necessary to use cutting edge technology or whether a more tried and tested solution would deliver all or most of the benefits
- Using the team to create the technical design, this way you have a far greater chance of something robust and scalable with the added bonus that everybody has a stake in making it succeed
- Agreeing a change control process with the customer before the project starts and sticking to it.
- Creating a weekly work-plan for the resources so they remain focused on the priorities and don't get side tracked.
- Putting together a test plan with test scenarios based on the user requirements and ensuring you have enough resource and user commitment to run them.

## **Managing Expectations**

The Problem:

Often projects start on a high with a huge amount of optimism. During the project lifecycle expectations can inflate to an unreasonable degree well beyond the reality of what can be delivered.

The Solution:

It is the role of the project manager to manage expectations to a sensible level. One way to do this is to break projects down into smaller chunks or phases with frequent milestones. This way you manage expectations by making regular deliveries so the customer sees what they are getting. This approach ensures the project delivers to the customers' expectations by giving them early visibility of what you are building.

Don't become the casualty of a failed project, put measures in place that address these five key areas to help ensure your success. After all it's not Rocket Science!