Six Things That Derail a Project and How to Avoid Them

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Contents

Mistakes Happen

From a missed deadline to a misunderstanding, a project will inevitably run into bumps along the way.

Most of the time, these small mishaps are just annoying. However, there are a number of things that can stop a project in its tracks and lead to its ultimate failure. Poor communication or lack of accountability may start off as a "small mishap," but can end up silently killing your entire project.

To help keep your project on track, we asked six project management experts to share the number one thing that kills a project. We'll explain the dangers of each one and share our top tips for avoiding these project derailers.

Project Killer #1
Poor Communication

*"The biggest thing that derails a project is **poor communication**. It affects everything from the perception of success to team morale to getting action on project risks. Good communication is possible when the team trusts each other and has the tools they need to actually communicate - both in terms of technology-mediated communication and the soft skills that give them the confidence and abilities to have difficult conversations when necessary."*

Elizabeth Harrin

Award-winning blogger at A Girl's Guide to PM and communications consultancy director of The Otobos Group, a project communications consultancy.

Poor Communication

1/3
Poor Communication

50%+
Negative Impact

A 2013 PMI study found that poor communication was the primary contributor to project failure one third of the time and had a negative impact on project success more than half the time.

The Solution:
3 Ways to Improve Project Communication

Skillfully ask questions: Use open-ended questions when you want to uncover missing information or make sure everyone has the same understanding of expectations. Use closed-ended questions (yes or no questions) to receive specific details or regain control of a meandering conversation. And, always avoid loaded questions (statements or accusations that are disguised as questions).

Don't sugarcoat anything: If you have bad news to deliver, communicate it Sponsors quickly and clearly. Don't bury the bad news with jargon or sandwich it in between two pieces of great news. Just say it. Chances are, your team members will already have a feeling something is up, and the longer you wait to share the news, the worse they will react.

Think before you email: Before you absentmindedly send an email, reconsider if that's the best medium for your message. If you need to answer a quick question or send a brief update, email is great. If you need to give feedback or convey important project information, make the conversation face-to-face. And, if you do need to send an email, use action words like "Urgent," "Help," or "Review" to help employees prioritize their messages.

Lack of Clarity

"**Lack of clarity.** *When people work on the same project but have different notions for what the goals are, what their roles are, and how or why to help each other when things go wrong, it creates the friction that makes projects fail.*"

Scott Berkun

Best-selling author and popular speaker on philosophy, culture, business, and more.

Lack of Clarity

68%+
Project Sponsors

?
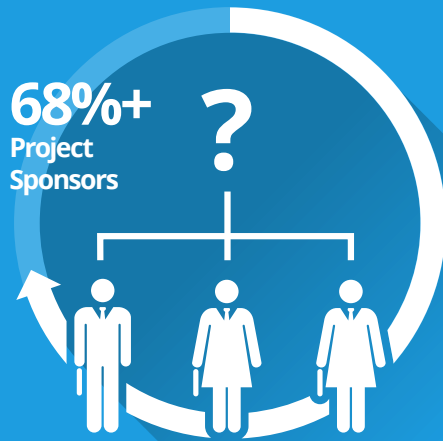
According to a 2010 study by professional service company KPMG, 68% of projects don't have an effective project sponsor to provide clear direction or help address problems.

The Solution:
4 Ways to Improve Clarity

Follow the 3 Cs: We all know that clarity is important, but what does it actually mean and how do you get there? Break it down into three buckets: clarity of purpose, clarity of plan, and clarity of responsibility. Ensure your team understands what needs to get done and the context of their work, the deadlines and timelines, and who is responsible for each task.

Develop a team charter: Develop a team charter to motivate and align your team around a common purpose. A charter will also clarify your project direction and reduce confusion about objectives. It should include the team purpose, scope, members, desired end result, and deliverables.

Create a shared to-do list: To avoid duplicate work, create a shared repository that outlines all project tasks and their owners. This up-to-date document can communicate status and progress to external stakeholders and also allows team members to quickly understand who is doing what.

Hold regular meetings: Short, frequent status meetings are better than long, infrequent updates. Regular meetings keep the team on track, motivated, and focused, and allows you to keep everyone in the loop as things happen. Make sure to cover the status of tasks and any roadblockers or challenges in the meeting.

Peter Taylor
*Best-selling author of "The Lazy Winner" and "The Lazy Project Manager."*

Lack of Expectation Management

*"The biggest 'project killer' I believe is a **lack of expectation management**. I describe the early part of any project as the 'journey of expectation management' as all of the project representatives and stakeholders come to learn about each other and understand what the project truly aims to deliver, with the critical message being that nobody understands everything at the start of the project. The biggest 'project killer' I believe is a combination of lack of expectation management at this key point accompanied with a rush to action."*

False Expectations

70%
IT Projects

21%
Stakeholder Requirements
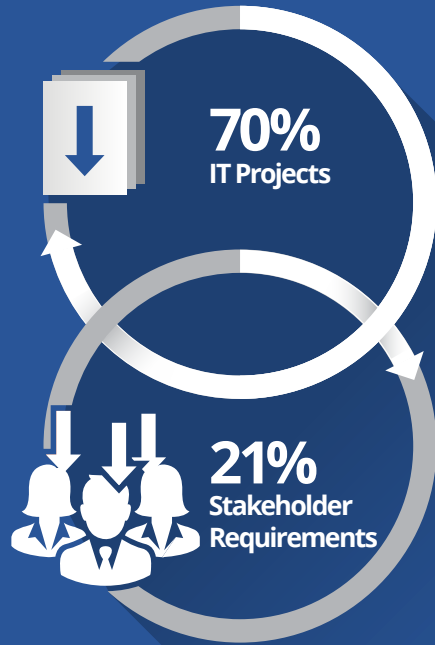
The University of Missouri found that 70% of all IT-related projects fail to meet objectives.

21% of projects will fail to meet stakeholder requirements, according to New Bamboo.

The Solution:
3 Ways to Improve Expectation Management

Hold pre-kickoff meetings: Schedule two different meetings, one with your team and one with stakeholders, to review and discuss the project documentation and objectives. Make sure you talk about the scope statement, timeline, project requirements, communication, and next steps. Agreeing on these critical pieces before the project starts will eliminate confusion later on.

Don't make assumptions: Never assume that a stakeholder or team member has the same understanding of a project, deadline, or task that you do. Make sure to over-communicate rather than under-communicate. Clarify what is expected and how it will be accomplished in every conversation.

Push back: If an external party, like a vendor or stakeholder, is asking you to agree to unrealistic expectations, push back. You need to be confident in the project expectations, which means that you may have to say no to a couple people along the way.

Johanna Rothman

Management consultant for software leaders.

Multitasking

*"The silent project killer, and in my experience the thing that kills more projects, is **multitasking**. When people lose focus, they create defects. They don't test everything. Everyone feels as if they are always running to catch up—and they are. The person you need to ask a question of is working on something else. Even though that person was supposed to be on your project. If you want to give your project a fighting chance, make sure your project has all the right people assigned, and that they are not trying to split their focus."*

Multitasking

40%
Drop in Productivity

-2.1
Loss in Hours

The American Psychological Association found that multitaskers experience a 40% drop in productivity.

The average employee loses 2.1 hours a day to interruptions or distractions, according to Basex.

The Solution:
3 Steps to Avoid Multitasking

Know your team's strengths: Understand your team members' skills and weaknesses, and change the way you delegate. If you need a project completed in a short time, assign it to someone you know works fast. Giving it to someone who is more meticulous will likely drive that employee to multitask to get it done.

Get the right tools: Find a common tool for the whole team to use. If people can communicate, share files, and create reports in the same platform, you've already eliminated the need for three different apps. No more Gchatting, adding files to Dropbox or emailing attachments – you can help streamline all project work and keep everything in one place.

Allow quiet time: Make space for team members if they need a quiet environment to work. Perhaps you have an office that people can reserve. Or, if possible, cluster the louder employees in one area so those who need less noise can sit further away and concentrate better.

Project Killer #5
# Scope Creep & Churn

*"The single largest project killer is **uncontrolled scope creep and churn**. Changes happen and are to be expected. However as changes are identified and added to the requirements or to the backlog, they need to be prioritized based on value. Chronically saying 'yes' to everything without evaluating the value of the change and the impact to other components of the project is a killer!"*

Thomas Cagley
Process improvement consultant.

Scope Creep

44%
Scope Creep

39%
Project Success
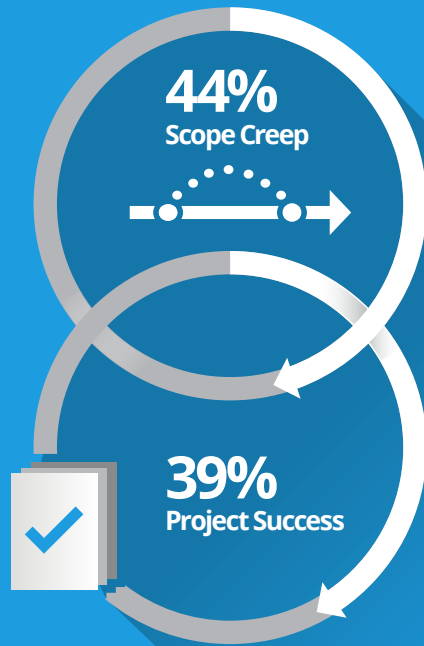
PMI found that 44% of projects completed in 2015 experienced scope creep.

Only 39% of projects succeed, according to a 2012 study by the Standish Group.

The Solution:
3 Ways to Prevent Scope Creep

Write an accurate project scope statement: Lack of clear project scope and agreement is the biggest cause of project creep. At the beginning of each project, you should write a scope statement that defines exactly what does and does not fall into the project, and have your team and stakeholders all agree to it.

Strictly enforce the change request process: It's inevitable that stakeholders will ask for "small" scope changes. And it's very easy to continually ask for changes verbally, but if you start requiring that people fill out a change request document, many of these scope changes will miraculously disappear.

Add another project phase: If stakeholders insist that certain changes are made to the project, explain that you can't meet the original project deadline and include all the new changes. But, if you add a second phase to the project, you can address all the changes and still meet deadlines.

Project Killer #6
Not Assigning Roles and Responsibilities

*"The biggest thing that kills a project is **not assigning roles and responsibilities**. If you put everyone in charge, you are putting no one in charge. Team member may assume that someone else is taking care of an important detail - and in the end the ball gets dropped and the project suffers. In your project plan, define who is going to do what and stick to it - holding people accountable for the delivery."*

Steven Baker

Oil and gas project manager.

Not Assigning Roles and Responsibilities

38%
Roles and Responsibilities

38% of IT projects include confusion around team roles and responsibilities, according to a 2011 study by Geneca.

The Solution:
3 Methods of Defining Roles & Responsibilities

Follow the RASIC chart: RASIC stands for responsible (the task lead), approve (the person who approves a task), support (the person who helps the task lead), inform (the people who need to be informed of progress), and consult (the person who offers guidance or advice). Create a simple matrix with your tasks in one column and the name of team members along the top row. Assign roles for each task using the different letters of RASIC.

Create a project team organizational chart: Visualize roles, duties, and responsibilities of each team member with an org chart. To create a project team organizational chart, list all the people participating in your project and their roles, and identify stakeholders. Then, use all that information to create a chart and display the relationships between the team and stakeholders. Therelationships will show who is reporting to whom.

Develop a function phase matrix: This table is organized by functions (rows) and phases (columns), allowing you to map each task to the correct phase. By creating this table as a team, you can discuss any potential gaps or overlap between functions and it allows for cross-department visibility in the project.

Is Your Project at Risk?

Now that you know what to watch out for, how do you know if your own project is actually in trouble?

		YES	NO
01	**Does your whole team have the same understanding of project objectives?**	☐	☐
02	**Have you clearly communicated task ownership, deadlines, and expectations?**	☐	☐
03	**Have you reviewed project expectations with all stakeholders involved?**	☐	☐
04	**Do you frequently give feedback, both positive and negative, to your team?**	☐	☐
05	**Is your team able to focus on one or two tasks at a time, without major distractions?**	☐	☐

Is Your Project at Risk?

		YES	NO
06	**Is your scope of work constantly changing?**	☐	☐
07	**Does your team understand the context of their work?**	☐	☐
08	**Have you written a project scope statement?**	☐	☐
09	**Do people know how to view project status and progress?**	☐	☐
10	**Do you communicate project risks and failures as soon as they arise?**	☐	☐

If you answered "no" five or more times, your project may be at risk of being derailed. Follow our tips throughout this e-book to get back on track.

The Secret to Project Success

With fewer than one-third of all projects completed on time and on budget, it can sometimes feel impossible to lead a new project to success.

When you're managing hundreds of details and dozens of internal and external collaborators, small mistakes can slip through the cracks only to reappear later, bigger and badder than ever.

The secret to project success is to understand the risks and warning signs,and catch mishaps before they snowball out of control. With these six project derailers and our top tips to avoid them, you can pinpoint potential trouble and steer your project back on course.

Don't let one seemingly small mishap turn into a silent project killer.

About Smartsheet

Organizations need a way to get work done, not just talk about it. Smartsheet is the best way to plan, track, capture, automate, and report on work, enabling you to move from idea to impact – fast. Smartsheet cloud-based work execution platform empowers collaboration, drives better decision making, and accelerates innovation for over 74,000 brands, and millions of information workers, including more than 50 percent of the Fortune 500. Named by Forbes as one of the world's top private cloud companies, Smartsheet complements existing enterprise investments by deeply integrating with applications from Microsoft, Google, Salesforce, Atlassian, and many others.

Click here to see firsthand how Smartsheet can help you keep your projects on track.

The Experts

Elizabeth Harrin is a career project and program manager with a decade of experience in healthcare and financial services. She is the author of "Social Media for Projects Managers," "Customer-Centric Project Management," and "Shortcuts to Success: Project Management in the Real World." Her blog, A Girl's Guide to PM, has won the project management category of Computer Weekly's IT Blog awards in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

Scott Berkun is a best-selling author and popular speaker on creativity, philosophy, culture, business and many other subjects. He's the author of six books, including "The Myths of Innovation," "Confessions of a Public Speaker," and "The Year Without Pants." His work has appeared, or been mentioned, in the New York Times, the Washington Post, Forbes, the Wall Street Journal, The Economist, The Guardian, Wired magazine, USA Today, and more.

Peter Taylor is the author of two best-selling books on 'Productive Laziness' - "The Lazy Winner" and "The Lazy Project Manager" as well as many others. In the last four years, he has focused on writing and lecturing with over 200 presentations around the world in over 25 countries and has been described as "perhaps the most entertaining and inspiring speaker in the project management world today."

Johanna Rothman is the founder of Rothman Consulting Group, offering management coaching, project management and mentoring, agile coaching, and more. She is the author of nearly a dozen books, including "Agile and Learn Program Management" and "Hiring Geeks that Fit." She also publishes a monthly email newsletter, The Pragmatic Manager, and writes two blogs.

Thomas Cagley is a process improvement consultant, blogger, and podcaster. He is the vice president of consulting at the David Consulting Group. He is also the author of "Mastering Software Project Management: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques" and writes the Process Improvement and Measurement blog.

Steven Baker is a project manager specializing in automation with more than 25 years of experience. He is currently the senior project manager at CSE ICON, providing enterprise-wide integration services to the oil and gas industry. He specializes in owner representation and controlling the relationships between suppliers and customers.