

How to deal with Out of Control Requirements and save your project

If your project is being threatened by out of control requirements, try these 10 guidelines in preventing and managing Scope Creep

For a project manager or business systems analyst, it's customary to meet with stakeholders to obtain project requirements signoff. However, what invariably happens is the customer deciding they need a new set of features outside the scope of the current requirements document. This dilemma, known as "scope creep" or "feature creep" is a common project killer, and it is critical for a project manager to know how to effectively manage this situation when it occurs.

According to the 2004 Chaos report by the The Standish Group, over 68% of large software projects end up failing to fully meet the needs of their customers or never reaching completion. Out of these failed projects, over 80% of them occur because of runaway requirements (Scope Creep). Because of these staggering numbers, later in the article I will provide 10 useful guidelines to ward off scope creep, to give your project a better chance for success.

What is Scope Creep?

Before jumping into the impacts and treatment of Scope Creep, let's first look at a definition. Scope Creep refers to uncontrolled changes in a project scope for already approved projects – hence the project team drifts out of control from its original purpose.

So what are the impacts of Scope Creep? Looking at this definition, it's simple to surmise that "uncontrolled changes" would lead to project delays, but that's not the full extent. Runaway scope will also lead to out of control costs, frustration and dissent within the project team, degraded quality due to the tendency of rushing through the new functionality, and ultimately a cancelled project resulting from the budget or timeline becoming too unrealistic.

Hiring a project manager with a Project Management certification or an MBA does certainly not guarantee success. It often takes a seasoned project manager with the experience and tenacity in dealing with difficult business owners who inadvertently derail their own projects.

While controlling scope creep is something often mastered with years of experience, the following ten best practices should be helpful in keeping your projects on track.

Tip 1) Perform a thorough requirements analysis. To easily identify scope creep, you first need to have a really good handle on what the requirements are. Make sure you have an organized requirements management document that includes a mission statement, a background statement that includes needs, the high level features, and as many detailed requirements as possible which all map back up to the features. By producing a rich and thorough set of requirements, you can get a clean baseline of what the system needs to do which can often mitigate any upfront scope creep.

Tip 2) Implement a solid Change Control Process Upfront. By implementing an enforcing a strong change control process, you are effectively putting a “gate” around your project requirements and preventing changes “through the back door”. By doing this, it adds a level of complexity for your customers and can discourage them from making changes. This is usually more beneficial in larger projects where scope creep could kill a project.

Tip 3) Associating a cost of scope change. In many organizations, a sponsor has control over the development resources and may not quantify the cost of making changes. However, all changes that require work have a cost – both in terms of resource time and the delay of revenue or cost-savings in the delay. By knowing how to measure the cost of change and putting that in front of the customer, it’s a great way of discouraging customers from freely making changes.

Tip 4) Don’t say no, say “not yet”. Your customer may be determined enough to get through your change control process and incur the cost and throw off the timeline. Even so, you may want to consider saying “not yet” instead of a “no”. What you promote is the concept of phasing in new features. By having a Phase 2 through Phase n of your project, you allow to release components instead of delaying your project and release everything at the same time.

Tip 5) Getting your customer to “sign off”. In terms of managing a project, getting your customer to signoff on the requirements and scope changes should hold them accountable for understanding and approving the requirements and scope. This is always a smart idea in that it protects the project team as well as discourages making easy changes. Whether this comes in the form of them saying “I agree” in an email or physically signing the document, sell them on the benefits of “signoff” as a milestone for the project team.

Tip 6) Use Baseline as a method to measure change. A requirements baseline is your 1.0 version of requirements where future versions are measured against. The benefit is that when there are multiple change requests leading to multiple requirements documents, you will have the ability to measure the frequency and scope of new changes. The added scope should then be flagged and associated with cost and time. This benefits the project manager in having more control of the project. When selecting a requirements management tool, make sure your tool has this capability.

Tip 7) Don't be a "yes man". While we all want to seek approval from our customer and keep them happy, you run the risk of being a "yes man". The value in saying "yes" is critical when trying to close a sale, but after the close and during the development of a project a good project manager will resist the urge to coddle their customer by saying yes. Another risk is the tradeoff in when we say "yes" to a feature and solve a customer problem, we can be indirectly causing a problem because of bad timing, added complexity and missed dates.

Tip 8) Knowing when to sound the alarm. We all get annoyed when working with an "alarmist" or someone who "freaks out" sending high-strung emails when an issue comes up that doesn't merit the urgency that goes along with an issue. However, when it comes to scope creep, using email to broadcast a critical scope change can be a very effective way in keeping the project on track. You should absolutely send an email to the appropriate managers with key information such as what the change is, the cost, the benefits and the impact to the schedule. Sometimes you'll find that a lateral manager to the sponsor will fight your fire for you. But the balancing act is to keep good will with your project sponsor. The key here is exercising sound judgment when sending the email.

Tip 9) Implementing a good requirements management tool. Producing requirements documents and carefully managing requirements is a critical aspect of your project. Besides baselining your requirements and producing documents, another key aspect of your tool is that it can engage your full project team so developers and analysts can share requirements as they come in. The organizations that choose to have a solid requirements process and use a tool have a far greater chance of success in delivering projects on-time with accuracy.

Tip 10) Always have a proactive stance for feature creep. In most sports, you'll see the athletes in a "ready" position waiting for an action which they will act on. Being prepared and proactive, especially for feature creep, can ensure that you won't be caught off guard when you find the project scope changing.

Following these best practices for effectively handling scope creep should be a good guideline in helping you manage scope creep on your projects. However, it's also important to note that even the best project managers can't always prevent feature creep from happening. Some project managers that shy from adversity may choose to resign themselves from the project, preferring to find a more realistic project.

When you find yourself on a project where there is obvious scope creep and out of control requirements, remember to keep a positive attitude and treat even a troubled project as a learning experience. Even if you can't save your current project from scope creep, do what you can to minimize the negative impact and bring your project to completion to the best of your ability. Don't trivialize the phrase "...better late than never...". Experienced managers value project managers that can complete projects, especially in difficult environments, as it always equates to lowering the bottom-line.



About Darren Levy, Principal, GatherSpace.com

Darren Levy is the the founder and Principal of GatherSpace.com. GatherSpace.com provides a hosted Web 2.0 Agile solution for managing software requirements. GatherSpace.com also provides consulting services for business analysis as well as project management for any sized online projects.

For 17 years, Darren Levy has been involved with Software Development projects in the capacity of senior systems engineer, business systems analyst as well as lead technology project management. He has deployed solutions for all sized companies including Chase Manhattan Bank, Agency.com, First Advantage Corporation, Toyota, Infospace Mobile, and LowerMyBills.com