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13 Tips for Keeping IT Projects Under Control

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March 18, 2013

Scope creep. Team members who don't understand what's expected of them. Poor inter-departmental communication. These are just some of the problems project managers constantly face.

So how do you keep projects under control? CIO.com asked dozens of project managers and project management experts to find out. Here are their top 13 suggestions for dealing with the challenges all project managers face at one time or another--and for keeping projects in check.





credit: Michael McCloskey

1. Appoint the right project manager for the job. "Hire project managers who will have the respect of the developers and who understand what they are doing," says Harry E. Keller, the president, CEO and founder of [Smart Science Education Inc.](#) "Nothing kills IT projects faster than poor management. It's tough because most developers aren't suited to management and most managers are clueless regarding developer types, but it's worth the effort."

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2. Support the project manager with the right team. "The CIO must adequately equip the team with the right people," says Ben Lichtenwalner, senior manager of Internet & eCommerce for Whirlpool Corporation and founder of [ModernServantLeader.com](#). Not only must you choose the right project manager, but you need to "support your project manager with the right team members (business analyst, QA manager, etc.) so the project manager can [properly] manage the project and [doesn't] do all the work."

"Allocate resources on the basis of capability not availability," says Gerardo Menegaz, executive IT architect, IBM Global Technology Services. "Too often resources are allocated in order to clear a bench rather than due to a skills match with requirements. In the end this will only serve to undermine the success of the project," he says.

3. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of your project team. "The most important thing in keeping projects under control is to 'know your horses,' as my dad would say," says Dr. Tim Lynch, the CEO of [PsychsoftPC](#), the maker of high performance gaming computers and graphics workstations. "That is, you need to know who on your team works best with minimal supervision and can be left to run, who needs to be spurred on and who needs to be reined in--and manage them accordingly."

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4. Scope out the project then strip it down. "We scope out the entire project from soup to nuts. Then we look to cut it by nearly 50 percent," says Patrick Clements, the CEO of [bigWebApps.com](#). "From that 50 percent of the project we take three things we can start and complete to make the project a success, basically the MVP (minimum viable product) method."

5. Prioritize tasks and come up with guidelines for when priorities conflict. "Good project managers know that multitasking is a big productivity killer, so they [should] create an environment where individuals and teams can focus on a few tasks at a time," says Sanjeev Gupta, CEO, [Realization Technologies](#), which provides planning and execution software.

"This involves reducing the number of work streams in execution (to minimize priority conflicts) and starting new work streams only when all the necessary inputs are in place," Gupta says. In addition, it's essential to prioritize tasks and establish guidelines and procedures for what to do when priority conflicts do arise. "These measures combined help PMs improve the rate of execution by as much as 20 to 50 percent," he says.

6. Actively monitor projects, as well as your team. "The project manager must be vigilantly aware of what is going on at all times," says Albert Sarvis, PMP, who leads the project management team at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology.

"Make it a matter of consistent routine to monitor project metrics at the resource level and don't let the traditional project tools be your only guide," he says. "No project management tool can illuminate project surprises as well as a project team member can provide through regular one-on-one communication."

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7. Use project management software. "Do not use email as a project management tool," says Kent Milholland, the president of [NeoNexus](#), which provides Web design, custom Web apps and Internet marketing solutions. "It's too hard to follow."

Instead, Milholland says, "keep software project management on a system like [Assembla](#), or even [Basecamp](#), so the details of each request are documented without a whole lot of extra effort. Web-based project management allows everyone from users to programmers to clients to decision makers to follow the progress with ease."

8. Hold weekly meetings. "Set up a short, mandatory weekly meeting where each team member takes a minute or two to tell the team what they did last week, their plans for this next week and any roadblocks they have that the team can help with," says Grant M. Howe, vice president of Research and Development, [Sage Nonprofit Solutions](#), which offers software products and services to government agencies and nonprofit organizations. "This creates urgency for each individual on the team around making progress every week."

9. Manage change. "Managing changes to the original scope of work is critical to keeping projects under control," says Jaimin Doshi, principal consultant, [AppleTech Consultants](#), an IT consulting and project management firm.

"It is important to [use] change control forms to analyze the impact of the changes with respect to time, cost and essentiality," Doshi says. "Changes considered as cosmetic (minor) should also be tracked by project managers as implementing and testing those changes could sometimes add up to substantial hours."

10. Take a hard line against scope creep. "Scope creep is the major cause of projects getting out of control," says Nick Coons, technical director, [Hyperion Works](#), a provider of Websites, custom Web apps and software and IT management.

However, "spending the time up front to lay the groundwork and clearly define the scope will help keep the project on track," he says. Moreover, "when the client inevitably makes out-of-scope requests, don't be shy about telling them that you'll add their request to 'Phase 2' of the project, which will have its own scope and cost."

11. Create milestones for every member of the team--and celebrate them when met. "Creating milestones in the planning phase for you and your team will help you keep track of your progress and also give you a sense of accomplishment when you reach each milestone," says G. Karthik, project director, [Hexaware Technologies](#), a business intelligence, business analytics and enterprise solution



provider.

Then, "when you reach milestones, bring everyone together for some fun social time (e.g., hold an ice cream social in the office) to [reward team members] and keep everyone excited about the project," says Michael Hamelin, chief security architect at [Tufin Technologies](#), a provider of firewall management solutions. For teams that are spread out geographically or working virtually, acknowledge milestones with smaller gestures, which can be as simple as a congratulatory email.

12. Consider using agile methodology. "We've found that managing projects by following the agile methodology works very well for us," says Andre Winter, senior engineering project manager, [CA Technologies](#). "This methodology allows the team to react and to adjust our projects to the needs of the market while staying true to the interests, values and abilities of our company."

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13. Track time. "Keep track of the time spent by the key personnel responsible for the completion of major parts of the project," advises Ken Leland III, vice president of Engineering, [Monmouth Telecom](#). "This will alert you to inaccuracies in your original estimates early on in the project and give you more time to deal with the consequences," he says. To keep track of time spent by internal resources, Leland suggests cloud-based services like [toggl.com](#).

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