

Project Management : Goals, Methods, and Implementation

Defining Projects and Project Management

A good place to begin a discussion of project management at XYZ Company would be with the definition of a “project.” The highly regarded *Project Management Body of Knowledge*, written by the Project Management Institute, has defined a project as “*a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service.*” Looking closely at this definition we see that projects are *temporary*; they have a definite beginning and a definite end. We also see that projects are *unique*; each project has its distinguishing characteristics.

This definition accurately describes development projects at XYZ Company. Here, development projects typically begin as an idea in the editorial, creative services, production, advertising, or business development. All XYZ Company development projects are unique in that they are requested from and reside on different channels or areas of the network. A working definition of XYZ Company development projects might be “*the expeditious creation of new content areas, tools, graphics, site navigation or other enhancements to XYZ Company.com using a variety of resources including, producers, editors, programmers, designers, and operations personnel.*”

Now that we have a working definition of an XYZ Company project, we need to define project management and apply that definition to XYZ Company. The *Project Management Body of Knowledge* defines project management as “*...the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities in order to meet or exceed stakeholder needs and expectations from a project.*” Looking closer we see that the project manager uses “knowledge and skills,” attributes that can be summed up in one word: experience. Through the experience of working on several projects, the project manager’s skills are developed. These skills are a function of the particular industry in which the project manager works, and the industry directly informs the “techniques” or methodology that is employed. In the Internet industry project management methodology is still very much in the process of being defined, created, tested, and refined. Keeping this in mind, a working definition of project management for XYZ Company might be “*the use of experience, tact, and communication to faithfully guide development projects through the necessary departments and processes while managing editorial or business expectations and meeting business-driven deadlines imposed on the project.*”

The Web and Project Management

Traditional business practices often have to be modified as they are adapted to a particular industry. Project management processes in the online industry must consider these unique attributes:

- The online industry is still in its infancy.
- Often development teams have only worked together for weeks or months, not years.
- Team members usually are working concurrently on other development projects with other teams.
- Technology changes at an incredibly accelerated rate.
- Business deals such as sponsorships, partnerships and promotions may require large scale web development, from art to programming, but allow only a matter of days to complete the project.
- The high demand for skilled resources like programmers, producers and designers has created a competitive market and a high attrition rate. Team members may jump ship mid-project.

To illustrate the Internet's current struggle with implementing project management in the development process, we need only consider the variety of job titles different web companies employ to define the same job content. These businesses range from design shops to content providers to ad delivery companies. The titles most often heard are: Web producer, account manager, client partner, project manager, information architect, technology producer, tech lead, and production manager. All of these titles, depending on the company or the headhunter, refer to basically the same job—guiding web development projects to completion. Closer to home, the newness of project management in the industry is exhibited in the fact that XYZ Company, after three years online, has only recently instituted the project management group and methodology in the production department .

One of the most difficult challenges for project managers in the online industry is meeting the extremely tight deadlines that accompany most projects. This is certainly the case at XYZ Company. These deadlines are often the element that introduces the highest amount of risk into a project. Unlike software development, where the scope of the project defines the deadline, Web-based projects, especially in content companies like XYZ Company, have deadlines dictated by business needs. This arrangement can make programmers, designers, and others in the production process uncomfortable. These deadlines may be construed by production as unreasonable given the necessary tasks involved. There may also be significant amounts of revenue attached to the deadline, and the primary concern of the business owner is delivering the project on time and fulfilling any contractual obligations. The challenge for the project manager is to help the business owner define a realistic scope for the project and properly create and manage business expectations during development. At the same time, the project manager must estimate the time allotted to tasks and the completion of deliverables along the way, as well as identify risk to the project at any stage of the process and provide for contingency plans to alleviate that risk.

The Internet industry as a whole is struggling to establish standard and best practices to achieve a high success rate for online development projects. The XYZ Company project management group is working diligently to create and implement these processes as they apply to XYZ Company.

Defining Project Management Goals

Earlier we saw how different companies associated project management with a variety of job titles. In the same way, the goals of the project manager may seem to differ from company to company, while in fact the difference is slight and primarily the result of the different technologies and organizational structures implemented at a given company. Simply stated, the goal of the project manager is to deliver a project at or under the established deadline while keeping the project team informed, inspired, and on track.

Often, however, such simply stated goals are rarely achievable and don't reflect the reality involved in reaching the goal. A typical XYZ Company development project may include three or four different groups, all with different agendas. The business group wants the project launched within four weeks, the design group wants multiple revisions, the technology group wants more time to write the code, the editorial group wants to add a feature after the technology group has begun to write the code. Without a project manager to act as a point person for the project, the chances of the project making the deadline are slim; the risks to the project are obvious. Perhaps a more realistically stated goal for XYZ Company project managers may be "*to help project stakeholders understand the development process, prioritize project components, create a realistic project scope, identify risk and provide for fluid communication among all interested groups during the life of a project.*" The project manager is only one member of the development team; it

is every team member's responsibility to recognize the basic goal of delivering the project on time and intact.

XYZ Company Project Management Methods

The XYZ Company project management group has adopted, applied and modified standard project management methodology that has greatly enhanced the development process. Implementation of this methodology is still not one hundred percent and the kinks are still being worked out. It is important to keep in mind that the creation and implementation of project management in the online industry is itself an industry wide project.

The following steps describe the project manager's tasks and responsibilities during the life of a development project at XYZ Company. This list concentrates only on the project manager's role in a project, therefore other team members' steps, meetings, and tasks that do not need the project manager's input are not reflected in this list. The outcomes of some of these other tasks and meetings, however, may result in changes that affect a project's scope. In this case, the project manager would need to be informed in order to modify the scope and timeline of the project.

- A channel producer, editorial person, business person, or other XYZ Company staff member has an idea for a project. Depending on the staff member, their experience, their group, or their time, the idea will be written up in a preliminary specification. This early spec may be a multi-page document with a site map, page mockups and detailed user experience or it may simply be one paragraph in an e-mail. A meeting will be arranged to discuss the feasibility of the project and to begin to define the scope of the project. Attendees at this meeting may be the project sponsor, a project manager, a design resource and a tech resource or just the project stakeholder and a project manager. A proposed launch date is usually offered by the stakeholder based on business needs, seasonal promotion or simply a desired date. The project manager will take note of the date and, if it is a business-driven deadline, pass this information along to members of the production management team. The project is assigned a priority by management and added to the production queue.
- After the initial project meeting the project manager will write a front end spec describing the user experience. The project manager may work with the stakeholder to create a site map and page mockups. The stakeholder approves on the initial spec created by the project manager.
- A design kickoff meeting is called for members of the design group, the project stakeholder and her team, the project manager, and the application development tech lead to review the revised spec, site map and page mock-ups. The meeting agenda is to shape and finalize the details of the user experience from an interface perspective, the impact on functionality, and the underlying technology the final design will dictate. From this meeting the project manager can create design deliverable milestones as well as update the spec to reflect the changes established in the design kickoff meeting.
- While the project is in design production the project manager meets with the application development tech lead to discuss the application server development tasks involved in the project and to get an initial production time estimate.
- The project manager creates a project timeline in Microsoft Project based on the design milestones and the initial application development effort estimates. Time is added to the project timeline to account for design and editorial reviews throughout the life of the project as well as quality assurance testing. Using these initial time estimates and MS Project the project manager is able to establish a launch date for the project. The timeline is distributed to all members of the project team. The launch date is communicated to the project stakeholder. If the date is beyond the hard deadline the project manager and the stakeholder revisit the scope of the project and attempt to cut back on functionality. If this is not an option the

stakeholder must attempt to push the deadline back; if moving the deadline is not an option, the project manager communicates the situation to the production management team and an attempt will be made to add another resource to the project if doing so will help the project meet the deadline.

- When the design deliverables have been completed the project manager calls a production kickoff meeting. Attendees are the stake holder, the application developer, the tech lead and the project manager. The application development team reviews the final designs and discusses the programming required to create the functionality. Development tasks and milestones are established. After this meeting the project manager updates the spec with the technical details and modifies the initial project timeline with the new estimated efforts for the development tasks.
- With a project schedule in hand the project manager is able to track each team member's progress toward meeting their assigned milestones. The project manager communicates with all team members through e-mail and informal meetings to gather feedback about the development tasks, communicate any modifications to the scope of the project, revisit the timeline if necessary to be sure milestones are achievable and watch for circumstances or problems in the development cycle that may introduce risk to the project. If the project is large enough weekly progress meetings will be held and a project e-mail address will be created to easily disseminate information to all team members as well as to track communication.
- The project manager is able to update the project stake holders at anytime during the life of a project. Any risk identified at any stage of the development cycle is immediately communicated to the project stake holder. Keeping the project stakeholder apprised of the project development and communicating in an honest, direct and immediate manner is key to managing the expectations of the stakeholder and one of the project manager's most important responsibilities.
- As the project moves toward completion the project manager alerts other XYZ Company groups that need to be made aware of the upcoming launch. These groups include ad sales, metrics, meta search data and operations.
- When application Server development is complete the project manager hands the project off to the quality assurance team. During QA testing the project manager acts as a filter for bugs and potential usability problems the QA team is discovering. The QA team reports to the project manager, who functions as the interface between the QA team and the project team. This enables each group to have one point of contact, thereby expediting communication during this phase of the project.
- After the project is launched and live on the XYZ Company site the project manager calls a post-launch review meeting with all members of the project team. This meeting provides for an opportunity to discuss the project's development, identify and discuss problems that may have occurred, and find solutions for them.

Methodology Implementation

Project management in the online industry as a whole is still in its infancy. Because the project management group is a relatively new addition to XYZ Company, many project stake holders are unaware of the group's role in a project, their methods of operation, and the importance of applying project management processes to a development project.

Currently, the steps described above are not faithfully applied to all development projects. However, with the introduction of project management the difference in projects that use methods and those that do not is readily apparent. Projects that do not have a project manager assigned to them suffer from a lack of organization, poor communication and often stall at some point in the

development process. These project failures illustrate the need for project management to be more fully implemented by XYZ Company. This mandate must come from management and be communicated to all members of the XYZ Company staff who are responsible for initiating projects. As XYZ Company grows, both in site content and staff, the number of development projects will increase. The adoption of and adherence to the project management methods described in this document will become critical to the success of future projects.

Next Steps

The project management group, with the help of the design and technology departments, is currently preparing an illustrated guide to the steps involved in development projects at XYZ Company. This guideline will provide new XYZ Company staff members as well as veterans with a reference for the production process, each individual group's role in the process, and each team member's responsibilities during production. This guide will also provide for the beginning of standard and best practices for project development and production at XYZ Company.