

Simplified Project Management

WISDOM to work by:

1. Don't make that mistake!
Avoid the three most common project management mistakes that nearly every SMB will make.
2. Here it is...one of the most important nuggets in the book.
The real secret to project management in the SMB is to match the project management methodology to the maturity of the organization.
3. Use an iterative approach.
There are no quick fixes and no way to jump on a moving train. Start with a rough approach, any approach, and improve it again and again.
4. Process, process, process.
This simplified project management methodology is a recipe for project success.
5. Embrace the plan, build, run approach!
It works every time.
6. Don't build it right the first time.
Consider the crawl-walk-run approach to technology solutions.

A. Introduction

This chapter and the following six chapters are common tactics that track through the three strategies and should be executed in conjunction with them.

Nothing is more frustrating than experiencing project management at most SMBs. The SMB usually commits one of three classic mistakes and continues to do so to this day. Which one have you committed?

1. The "technology" mistake - This is the mistake of buying an expensive tool like Microsoft Enterprise Project and concluding that project management is now "solved". This usually happens when the reigning management is technology focused and assumes every problem has a technology solution. When the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

2. The “it’s simple” mistake - This is the mistake of assuming that smart people can be put in charge of projects and that project management will just happen because smart people are working on it. This usually happens in an immature organization where leadership does not respect the experience of other organizations. They also do not comprehend the complexity of project management or the need for a methodology.
3. The “it must be world class” mistake - This is the antithesis of the “it’s simple” mistake where the SMB goes to the other extreme and makes the mistake of jumping from no methodology to a full blown comprehensive project management methodology. The chosen methodology could be a purchased methodology, an internally designed one or even something quite complex. This usually also happens in an immature organization where leadership does not respect experience and does not understand how to affect change or how to implement process.

The real secret to project management in the SMB is to match the project management methodology to the maturity of the organization. I can not say this loud enough. Please read it again. There are so many opportunities for mistakes with project management. On one extreme you have the SMBs that want no part of formal project management because they feel it will slow them down and provide no value. This is a terrible misconception and the fact is that the appropriate simplified project management methodology will both speed up project delivery and greatly improve the chances for project success. The other extreme is the SMB that takes months to define or select a methodology and then tries to implement it in one fell swoop. This, too, is a doomed approach since you cannot go from no methodology to a mature methodology with no stops in between. The fact is that even a simplistic methodology will begin to provide returns on your investment without jumping to an unworkably complex structure. The challenge is to select the appropriate project management methodology and to gain some acceptance and some use of that methodology. The best tool or methodology provides absolutely no value if it is not embraced and used. The worst tool provides some value even if it is just sparingly used. The overriding requirements for any SMB are speed and nimbleness. These must be reconciled with the application of some degree of structure and the ongoing attention to developing a full set of repeatable processes.

Jumping into a full blown project management methodology will be not only fruitless but some times catastrophic. The business ends up fighting against both the methodology and the project itself. I liken this to trying to board a moving train. **I recommend building a project management methodology in an iterative fashion.** I prefer the “crawl/walk/run” approach where the business uses a very simplistic initial approach and then graduates to more formality and more functionality over time. By this I mean the SMB should start with rough informal project steps and add formality and structure a little at a time. For example, I recommend starting with a simple Excel spreadsheet for a project plan and a simple one page Word document for a project definition. That is enough to get the process started.

Using my three business strategies as a framework, I can describe the creation and evolution of the project management methodology as a series of iterative steps.

B. Simplified Project Management and the Business Layer Strategy

As I recommend above, the project management methodology that will work best when the SMB is using the Business Layer Strategy is necessarily brief and fairly informal. It needs to lay the foundation for project management in a solid way so that the SMB can build on it as the SMB grows. I will outline this methodology as a series of steps that can be followed in order to develop a structured project management approach. Remember, do not get hung up on tools and technologies. The simpler the better here.

I am a proponent of the Franklin Covey methodology which promotes begin with the end in mind. I say that because the SMB should have a rough target methodology defined from the beginning and all work on methodology is done to arrive at that target state. This simplified project management target state is defined in Appendix 10-1. Please review it briefly before continuing. Here are the iterative steps I recommend for the Business Layer Strategy.

1. Define a project and commit to managing it

It sounds simplistic and redundant but the first step in simplified project management is to realize the difference between an activity and a project. This can be more complicated than it sounds. I like to define a project as a series of related activities with a common goal or end result. Defining a project can be a point of contention for the business but a rule of thumb is that it is a series of repeatable processes with a desired outcome. The critical step here is the commitment to recognizing and attempting to standardize and manage projects. Activities are just the individual things that are performed in the course of a normal business day and may or may not be part of a larger set of project activities. A project is a series of activities that all contribute to a desired end state. Once agreement is reached on what can be termed a project then a commitment needs to be made by the SMB to project management. If project management continues to be viewed as an obstacle and bureaucratic, then project management will continue to flounder.

2. Identify the two broad steps of planning and execution

Full blown structured project management gets some of its reputation for being too cumbersome partially because of the large number of steps that are usually identified and managed. The SMB does not need that level of formality. To begin, the two broad simple steps of “plan” and “execute” will suffice. This level of structure simply states the SMB should attempt to identify the various activities that will take place at a high level and identify the deliverables that will be produced to signify the activity is successfully completed. Some thought will have to be given to project dependencies but it is helpful to start planning in a sequential fashion as if activities occur in a linear mode. This simplistic way of viewing a project gets the process started.

3. Implement Excel spreadsheets as the formal project planning tool

Take the identified activities and create a project plan in the form of an Excel spreadsheet. Please refer to Appendices 10-4 and 10-5 for a recommended format and a simple project plan example. Start simple and expand over time. Identify the activity, the responsible person and the deliverable that must be accomplished to show the activity is complete. Do not skip the deliverable column. If possible, estimate the man hours related to the activity and try to establish start and end dates. That is it. Then use the project plan to conduct the project. Use it to identify the steps you missed, the change in deliverables, the inaccuracy of your estimates and so on. Each subsequent project plan should get better by being more comprehensive and more accurate. It becomes an iterative process of repeated improvements.

4. Define the specific broad types of projects

Using the Business Layer Strategy the SMB should be able to identify three broad types of projects based on the technology layers and then possibly additional types within the three layers.

- Infrastructure projects
 - Outsourcing infrastructure components
 - Major upgrades or enhancements to infrastructure components
- Back Office projects
 - Outsourcing back office components
 - Major upgrades or enhancements to back office components
- Customer facing projects
 - Building customer facing applications
 - Buying customer facing applications

The business could be engaged in other types of projects like opening branch offices or doing acquisitions, so these projects would need defined as well. The goal is to build a preset project plan template for each project type and to refine and improve that template over time. This improves the project management methodology and delivery. Since each of these projects will have different components or steps, it pays to treat them differently and build various project templates for them. Another problem with standard project management methodologies is that they try to use the same format and templates for every project. Customization and simplicity are more important. Please refer to Appendices 10-6, 10-7 and 10-8 for sample templates.

5. Add the first gate between planning and execution

To review, by this time in the evolution of the methodology the SMB has begun to formally recognize and initiate projects, has implemented a crude but effective project planning tool and technique, has identified and defined different types of projects and has begun to build templates for the different types of projects. These are big steps and will go a long way to formalization of a methodology and laying the foundation for future project

steps. One additional step that can be taken is to add a formal step between the planning of a project and the execution of the project. This step can be referred to as a gate. It could be as informal as an email distribution or a topic on a meeting agenda. It just states that the project plan is complete, the resources are committed and the time frames are set. It is like the starting gun to a foot race. The SMB has now added a gate between planning and execution and an additional level of structure and formality has now been attained.

6. Develop the project list

One last thing that can be accomplished at this stage of the project management methodology evolution is to develop a project list. Please refer to Appendix 1-3 for a sample project list format. It is simply a one page summary of all the active projects so that management at a glance can see what is being done. It has numerous uses including showing how resources are being committed, the target timeframes and the availability of project deliverables. Include on this list the columns for the type of project, owners or sponsors, project name, project due dates and so on. I am always amazed at how few SMBs have something as simple as an up to date project list. This later becomes a project portfolio and larger organizations sometimes dedicate an individual to managing the list. That should emphasize the importance of the project list.

C. Simplified Project Management and the Business Model Strategy

The SMB is growing in size and complexity and has migrated from the Business Layer to the Business Model Strategy. This transition should also be seen as an opportunity to expand and refine the project management methodology into a more formal structure and to build on the foundation that has been previously built. The recommended formalization steps that should now take place are detailed below.

1. Add a Charter/Scope document

Now it is time to resolve some of the problems that will have been encountered with projects where the scope seems to shift and where the outcome and deliverables always seem to miss the mark. This can be accomplished by a definitive charter/scope document. The purpose of this document is to identify what the project is about and establish an understanding and agreement among all project participants regarding scope, purpose, costs, deliverables and timelines. Please refer to Appendices 10-9 and 10-10 for a working template and instructions on how to fill it out and use it. These are the target or end state documents that you should be using by the time the project methodology structure is totally built. Feel free to start with an abbreviated document and add bullet points or paragraphs a few at a time. Start with just six or eight of the elements below and add a bullet element a month. Please do not try to start out with the full blown document as this will be seen as needless structure. Remember our iterative approach and build this document over time. Here are some recommended possible project charter/scope inclusions.

- Purpose
- Background
- Details
- Stakeholders
- Scope
- Goals/Objectives
- Deliverables
- Boundaries
- Constraints
- Dependencies
- Estimates and Resources
- Costs and ROI
- Benefits
- Assumptions
- Milestone Plan
- Organization of participants

I am always impressed at how little agreement truly exists on the scope of any project. The charter/scope document will broker these disagreements and go a long way to improving project delivery by providing clarity and understanding.

2. Add a communication plan

The purpose of a communication plan is to document and structure all project communications among project participants. Projects may take a few days or a few months (by the way, any project that exceeds ninety days should be immediately suspect, more on this later). It is necessary to keep all stakeholders informed about project progress and more importantly project problems. The tendency is to have ad hoc communications throughout. This is a bad project habit. Structured communications force a rigidity and structure that can contribute to project success. Please refer to Appendices 10-11 and 10-12 for a sample communication plan and instructions. To create the plan, do the following:

- Identify what messages need to be sent (progress, problem, decision needed)
- Identify the audience (project team, stakeholders, management)
- Select a frequency (weekly, as needed, monthly)
- Assign responsibility for putting out the message
- Define how the message will be sent (email, meeting, report)
- Define the intent of the message (progress, problem, phase completion).

If there is one step that seems to bring a project together it is the communication plan. Please also review the appropriate chapters on project reporting and incorporate these in the communication plan. Project reporting needs to follow a standard structure and focus solely on exceptions. Project reporting tends to become cumbersome because so much time can be spent on projects that are on schedule and meeting deadlines. There is no need to report on a project that is on schedule. Focus instead on the projects

with problems. Make project reporting focus on just the exceptions. Then consideration can be given to remedies to get the project back on track. A communication plan will assist with this approach.

3. Add a testing plan

Testing is a key component of any project. Having a test plan is another step to formalization that improves project success. Most SMBs take testing very lightly. They tend to put things into production and fix problems on the fly. This should be avoided at all times. Any production problem comes with a real cost to the business. Testing, as with the project management methodology and as with any other approach, should be implemented in an iterative fashion. Begin by doing some commonsense testing focusing on what is changing in the production environment. Expand from there. Add levels of testing for things like interfaces. Add testing against requirements. Introduce enhanced processes like user acceptance testing. The more formality that can be introduced over time, the less amount of down time will be experienced after installation. Things break when they are changed. Please refer to Appendices 10-13, 10-14 and 10-15 for test plan instructions, test plan example and testing goals. In lieu of something formal and for earlier stages, a verbal walk through of how the developer or engineer intends to test the project requirements is always an adventure. The goal here is to get the project participant to plan testing and make it an integral part of the project. Testing can address many levels of the project. For new software applications, a true test environment should be maintained and the business user needs to do acceptance testing against the project deliverables. A good guideline is to have three environments if at all possible. These would be development, testing and production. For infrastructure and back office applications, the IT project participant needs to work with the vendor to assure adequate testing is accomplished. Vendor participation is the key.

4. Replace the two broad steps of planning and execution with a Plan-Build-Run methodology

It is now time to abandon the broad and somewhat nebulous planning and execution phases for a three phased approach. I have had great success with a plan-build-run approach to project management. I have developed several tools and techniques for explaining this methodology to project teams and getting it embraced. Try this. Project management is as easy as one, two, three. There is one summary phrase called PBR (plan, build, run). There are two pass through gates. There is one moving from planning to building and one moving from building to running. There are three project phases called plan, build and run. Something as simple as having a catchphrase for your project management methodology reinforces the message. I have had employees quote this approach to me years after working with me. It is necessary to build some structure into the methodology to serve as the gates. The gate can be as simple as signature signoff on the charter/scope document and project plan or as complex as a structured user review and acceptance meeting. Start informally and add structure. Please refer to Appendix 10-16 for a pictorial representation of this project approach. Feel free to distribute liberally throughout the SMB.

5. Sharpen the deliverables

The methodology by this time should include the three phases and the activities and deliverables for each phase. To again quote Stephen Covey, it is time to sharpen the saw. That is to say the SMB must take time out occasionally to do maintenance on the tools that are being used. It is now appropriate to examine the deliverables in regards to form and content and see if improvements can be made. If templates are not being used or are not finalized, now is the time. If the planning documents need refinement or improvement, now is the time. If the deliverables are poorly constructed or not always delivered it is time to tighten things up. The project deliverables are more than just formalities. They are project milestones and project content that will define both the quality and speed of project delivery. Making them better will improve project performance. A word about milestones in general is timely. Never allow a project to go forward without frequent milestones. A project without milestones is like a ship without a rudder. It is critical to manage the milestones to manage the project. I once had a manager who asserted that he would fire me if I came to him with no time left on the project clock and requested a one or two week project extension. He understood several critical things about project management. He understood that a project should never get in trouble at the end of the timeline but somewhere in the beginning or the middle. He understood that I would not have managed to the milestones or the project deadline would not be in jeopardy. He understood that the one or two weeks would probably not be enough to finish a poorly managed project. The net result was clear to him. Without detailed milestones and meeting those milestones a project would not be completed on time. The project would be a failure.

6. Improve the project reporting

Included in the book, *IT is about the Strategy*, are some project reporting techniques and tool kits. There is also a summary and examples of this methodology in Chapter 6. Project reporting is critical to the success of a project and to the organization as a whole. Large amounts of time, energy and money are always being expended against projects in SMBs. Having the best tools and techniques for monitoring those expenditures is critical to the health of the organization. Please refer to Appendices 6-4, 6-5 and 6-6.

D. Simplified Project Management and the Business Process Strategy

The SMB has grown to a size where a formal structured but still simplified project management methodology is a must. If the business has worked on the methodology relentlessly during the two previous strategy executions, the work to be done now is simply the icing on the cake. In this strategy phase we finalize the methodology, publish it widely to the organization, sharply define all activities and deliverables, complete all templates, shore up all of the project tools and move beyond project management being a discreet activity to project management being the core process for getting things done.

1. Review the project against the strategy

No matter how vigilant an SMB monitors project activity, a non-strategic project or a project that flies in the face of the strategy is still often initiated. The SMB needs to assure that every project that gets initiated fits with the strategy being implemented. Pressure will come from Finance and Accounting to modify those back office applications. Pressure will come from Operations to build that on-the-fly Access database. These and other like projects will surface. They must be delicately squashed to assure that the projects aligned with the strategy are the only ones that take place.

2. Consider a crawl-walk-run approach to technology

One of the primary challenges with getting projects completed in the SMB is the length of time it usually takes to get a project completed. In most cases the project is critical to the business and the amount of time it takes is legitimate. There is always the push to get it done quicker. One of the approaches I have taken is to foster a crawl-walk-run mode of thinking. Please refer to Appendices 10-2 and 10-3 for a pictorial representation of this approach.

The approach is simply to explore ways to get the requisite functionality sooner without building the ultimate system. The approach was discovered in the area of new products or services where the SMB does not know whether the new product or service is viable and will sell. If not, why go to the expense of building the product or support service? Here the SMB would opt for manual procedures, low initial costs, increased head count and basic tools. As the product or service became viable, over time, these solutions would be replaced by intermediate automation such as “quick and dirty” technologies (Access databases, Excel spreadsheets). Intermediate solutions decrease costs, reduce head count and involve smaller solution tool kits. The ultimate solution or permanent system solutions should be considered when the product or service is deemed viable and needs to become part of the production process. These ultimate solutions should be counted on to reduce overall costs, reduce head count to support, and evoke the enterprise wide tools like VB and SQL and purchased solutions. This, too, is an iterative approach and can be conducted as multiple projects or one project with multiple phases. The goal is to focus on process and build a permanent business system/solution as the product or service matures and proves to be a winner.

3. Formalize documentation requirements

In the early stages of project management in the SMB the business is thrilled to get anything written down at all. As the project management methodology matures it is important that the SMB develop templates. These should be kept in a common source library. All of the deliverables, tools and documentation should follow a standard format. This allows for improvement and enhancement. The business leaders also get accustomed to seeing documents in a set format and can skip right to the sections and information critical to them. Using templates adds much value and clarity to projects. The added benefit is that the project is documented as it is being conducted.

Documentation as a whole does not get left to the end of the project where it is often ignored altogether. It is critical that project documentation is complete and comprehensive and that the project is leaving “foot prints”. Over time the SMB does not have to constantly reinvent the wheel for every document. Historically, the core knowledge of the project participants is stored and available for all time.

4. Add a training plan

Often times the success of the technology or software application is based on how well the business users accept and use the new technology. Training is a critical component and is easy to ignore since it seems to add cost to any project. More accurately, training should be viewed as an investment and not as a cost for a project. The better the functionality provided by the technology is used the more it will pay for itself. At this step of the methodology development, it is appropriate to add a training plan. The training plan is a level of formality that assures that those who will benefit most from the training will indeed receive it. Please refer to Appendices 10-17 and 10-18 for a training plan template and explanation. This is another level of structure and formality that will increase your chances for project success.

5. Add an installation plan

An installation plan also adds a formal step to the “go live” portion of any project. The installation plan adds value as a communication device and as a way of assuring a trouble free installation. The intent of the installation plan is to identify and document the steps, sequence and timing of the project installation. It serves to effectively coordinate and execute the project installation. Please refer to the Appendices in 10-19 and 10-20 for samples. The plan resembles a calendar with activities or notations. It allows for a participant to see at a glance what will happen and when it will happen. This is an excellent way for the project participants to review the sequence of events and poke holes in the process at the same time. Any problems caught before installation will ultimately save the SMB real dollars.

6. Add a gate between build and run steps

Just like the gate between “plan and build” there should be a gate between the “build and run” phases of projects. This gate goes hand in hand with the installation plan. It should include formal sign-off by the business that they have completed whatever testing they are responsible for and that the installation plan is both acceptable and will not cause service interruptions. This gate is an important milestone because it signals the end of all testing and the fact that the project is ready to install. This gate should be included in the communication plan as well. This is important additional functionality required to build a solid project management methodology.

7. Add a post project installation review

Another step that will improve the project management methodology is to institutionalize the process improvement surrounding the methodology. The easiest way to do this is to add a post project installation review step. This is a simple informal briefing session after project completion that allows for a little comic relief and a discussion of lessons learned. Please refer to the Appendices in 10-21 for both a template and instructions. This review also forces an examination of the three critical components of project management and project execution.

- Time to deliver
- Budget performance
- Functionality delivered

The goal is to improve the project delivery and execution through this simple project tool that is easily added to the project methodology. Failure to review will doom the SMB to repeating the same mistakes over and over again. You cannot fix the problems until you identify and address them.

8. Publish and advertise the methodology

One thing I have learned from working in IT all of my adult life is that sales and marketing is what it is all about. An IT department that does not market itself and its tools and techniques will not be a successful one. Project management affects the entire corporation. The resulting methodology needs to be understood and embraced by all. I have been successful in creating meaningful marketing campaigns around the more visible principles of the project management methodology. These principles include plan-build-run, crawl-walk-run or as-easy-as-1-2-3. I have found it useful to promote the methodology in all aspects of corporate communications and corporate culture. I have found it useful to conduct open meetings and brown bag luncheons to explain the concepts and extol the virtues. I have made the tools and templates readily available to all. Marketing is a difficult lesson for IT to learn, but the project management methodology is a great place to start. Sell it!

9. Review all document templates and deliverables and seek to improve the process over time

Most SMBs would do well to establish some form of a project management office with project methodology ownership. It does not have to be overly formal. This makes someone responsible for assuring that the methodology is followed and that the templates, tools, and techniques are dusted off every once in awhile and looked at with a critical eye. It is important to constantly tinker with and improve project management. Even pruning it is not necessarily a bad thing as long as quality does not suffer. The methodology needs to be a living, breathing thing that is used in every project effort. Take great pains to keep it as simple, straight forward, yet as comprehensive as the culture allows.

E. Summary

There is no need to buy MS Enterprise Project or any other such tool until the SMB becomes moderately large. Simplified project management is about the process. Project management does not add bureaucracy or red tape to a project. It adds structure and value. That is all. Project management increases the chances for project success. It allows the employees to see project management as a set of repeatable processes that can be learned and improved upon. No SMB should squander the opportunity to do project management right.