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### Project Management - A Law Librarian Survival Skill

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## Project Management - A Law Librarian Survival Skill

By [Carol A. Watson](http://www.llrx.com/authors/1131) (<http://www.llrx.com/authors/1131>), Published on December 22, 2009

As jacks of all trades, librarians are often called upon to manage complex projects. Project management is not a course that is typically offered in information science programs, but as a matter of survival, many of us have learned to juggle several balls in the air. Many of the techniques librarians intuitively use are clearly articulated as a formal structure with specific guidelines and regularized vocabulary.

Before planning a project, there are some preliminary underlying principles that must be understood. The most important concept to grasp is the definition of a project. A project is strictly defined as a temporary undertaking with a specific beginning and ending that results in a unique change. A project can be contrasted with daily or repetitive business as usual tasks. In other words, a project is not the typical "what we have to do to keep the lights on" daily work. A completed project provides an organization with a unique product or value-added service.

In order to be successful, all projects should have a sponsor or champion who is a part of upper management. A project should be undertaken to fulfill a legitimate business need. A project should not be attempted simply because someone on the IT team wants to experiment with the latest gee-whiz technology. Additionally, the input of all stakeholders who are impacted by the project should be solicited during the planning and implementation phases.

Project managers must also have a thorough understanding of the triple constraints of a project -- scope, time and budget. These three variables are tightly interwoven. A change to any one of these three constraints will necessarily affect the other two variables. If the scope of the project is increased, the time and/or budget must be increased. If the budget is reduced, it will be necessary to reduce the scope or increase the time line for the project.

Effective project management requires much thought and preparation before actually beginning to do the work of the project. Although many of us are eager to jump into the tasks related to a project, it is important to remember that careful planning will provide the groundwork for a successful project outcome. Remember, it takes time to save time.

The first step or phase of managing a project is to define the scope of the project. The scope statement should include the project's justification, requirements that are in and out of scope and a summary of the project's deliverables. One of the main reasons projects fail is due to poorly defined scope statements. The scope must be clearly defined in order to prevent scope creep. The most crucial step of developing the scope is to be sure the client or end-user agrees with the scope statement. Ideally, the project sponsor should approve a written statement of the project's scope.

Scope definition checklist:

- Why is the project being undertaken?
- Who is sponsoring the project?
- What value will the organization gain from the completion of this project?
- What is the budget for the project?

The next step is to develop a work breakdown structure (WBS). The WBS subdivides the project into manageable, discrete segments or tasks. Once the tasks have been defined, the project manager can allocate individuals and estimate a time line for completing the project. Developing a good WBS is a complex and time-consuming task, but it is well worth it to hone the skills necessary to create an accurate WBS in order to predict a realistic completion date for the project. Scheduling issues are the main sources of conflict as projects proceed. Consequently, it is crucial to carefully allocate time required for each task and to communicate frequently with the project's sponsor as the project progresses.

Work breakdown structure checklist:

- What tasks must be undertaken to complete the project?
- Can any of the tasks be subdivided?
- Which personnel will be responsible for tasks?
- How long will each task take to complete?

In fact, a key component of the WBS is to develop a communications plan. At the outset, determine who will communicate with the project sponsor, how often to provide updates and what information will be included in the update. For example, the communication plan might specify that the project sponsor will be updated weekly via email with bullet points indicating the status of the WBS elements.

Communications plan checklist:

- Who will be responsible for communicating with the project sponsor?
- How often will communications occur?
- What method will be used for communications?
- What type of content will be provided?

At this point, it is time to begin working on tasks of the WBS. The project manager is responsible for monitoring the team's performance and ensuring that all tasks are proceeding according to the schedule developed in the WBS. The project manager must be a vigilant watchdog while balancing the need to motivate and encourage the team.

Project checklist:

- Are all tasks being completed according to the WBS time line?
- Does the schedule, budget or scope need to be adjusted?

The final step in project management is to schedule a debriefing or closeout session when the project is completed. Keeping documentation on the project's successes and failures will help improve future projects.

### Debriefing checklist:

- What went well with the project?
- What went wrong?

And oh yes, don't forget to schedule a wrap-up party!

If you'd like to learn more about project management, one of the leading professional organizations for project management is the [Project Management Institute](http://www.pmi.org/) (PMI). PMI offers a certification process for credentials such as a scheduling project manager, risk project manager and professional project manager. Eligibility requirements range from 23 hours of training to four years of project experience.