

Stop Scope Creep Running Away With Your Project

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Scope creep is one of the most common reasons projects run over budget and deliver late. Often done with the best intentions, changes to scope during a project are a negative event best avoided.

Most project managers have experienced a case where the customer asks for something outside the scope agreed and expects it included at no extra cost. In fact, they're probably acting as if it's always been in scope.

Defining the boundaries of a project is difficult, but without a clear definition you're heading for problems.



What is Project Scope?

Scope is what a project manager commits to deliver early in the life of a project. It is defined during the requirements analysis phase of a project. Working closely with the customer and users the project manager identifies what is needed to bring about the project objectives. Scope is recorded in the project documentation and agreed with all affected parties.

What Causes Scope Creep?

The major causes of scope creep are:

- Poor Requirements Analysis.
- Not Involving Users Early Enough.
- Underestimating the Complexity of the Project.
- Lack of Change Control.
- Gold Plating.

Let's take a look at each in more detail:

Poor Requirements Analysis

The Problem:

Customers don't always know exactly what they want and often have only a vague idea. The *"I'll know it when I see it"* syndrome. Failure to spend enough time gathering business requirements (or assuming you know what is needed) can lead to a need for extra resources, increased cost and longer durations when new requirements emerge; in short scope creep.

The Solution:

Ensure you understand the project vision and spend time documenting and agreeing the project objectives with the customer. Produce a project initiation document that describes the deliverables and the result. It's a good idea to document what is out of scope, as well as what is in scope, for absolute clarity. Agree this document with the customer, spending time to walk them through it, and ask them to sign it off. Don't continue without a firm agreement.

Not Involving Users Early Enough

The Problem:

Thinking you know what the users want or need is a serious mistake. It is important to involve them in both the requirements analysis and design phases. The more involvement they have in the early stages of the project, the more likely it is you'll avoid scope creep.

The Solution:

Involve the users from the beginning of the project, allowing them to take part in the requirements and design phases; incorporate their suggestions and ideas. In software development projects document how the users will interact with the software and develop test cases for use later. Agree the requirements and design with all the projects stakeholders before the execution phase starts.

Underestimating the Complexity of the Project

The Problem:

The success or failure of a project can often be predicted by looking at whether similar projects have been successful in the past.

Many projects run into problems because they are new in an industry and have never been done before. Nobody knows what to expect, there are no lessons learned and no people to ask. Under these circumstances scope creep can hardly be avoided, causing budget overruns and late delivery.

The Solution:

These types of project need to have a degree of contingency built in. Include some slack in your project plan to allow for unforeseen issues and events, and increase the budget to account for extra resources that may be needed. However, don't overdo it, being significantly under budget and delivering early is often viewed negatively.

Lack of Change Control

The Problem:

You can expect there to be a degree of scope creep in most projects, therefore it is important to design a process to manage these changes. A simple process of document, consider, approve and resource can be carried out.

The Solution:

Introduce a change control form and change log from the start of the project. Communicate their use to the customer and project team. A formally written change request will allow you to assess the business benefit of any change, and gain approval before including them as additions to the scope. Attach a cost and time to each change so the customer is clear about its impact. Asking the customer to go through a formal process helps ensure there's a clear business value for the change being sought.

Gold Plating

The Problem:

Gold plating is the term given to the practice of exceeding the scope of a project in the belief it is adding value. In software development projects, it is not unusual for developers to add new features believing they will increase customer satisfaction. These changes consume time and budget and are not guaranteed to increase customer satisfaction.

The Solution:

Make sure all team members are fully aware of the project scope and concentrate on delivering it and nothing more. Ensure specifications are detailed enough to avoid any ambiguity that may lead to unnecessary work.

Reward team members for delivering to specification, on time and budget. Make it clear that undocumented features should not be added, but instead put through the change control process.

If there is time and money left at the end of the project, let the customer decide what to do.

Summary

To summarise, ensure you set expectations correctly at the beginning of a project, working closely with the users to define clearly what is in and out of scope. Record it in the project initiation document. However, don't assume the customer will read and understand this document. Spend time

with the customer to walk them through it and ensure they understand and agree the scope. Don't continue without a firm agreement.

Often it's not possible to avoid increasing scope during a project, especially if there is a sound business reason to do so. However, it must be managed properly. Design a change control process to ensure all changes are properly documented, considered, approved and resourced. Note: Where budget and time are increased with scope, the change is not usually considered scope creep.

Alternatively, you may wish to prevent changes being added piecemeal during the project and may decide to document them for a later phase. This allows the agreed phase to be delivered on time and budget, and the changes managed and resourced separately.

If you consider that only 32% ¹ of all projects fully succeed; then you're better-off spending your time delivering the requirements agreed at the beginning of the project, and avoiding gold plating.

Scope creep causes many project failures; by taking a few simple measures you can make sure it doesn't affect your projects.

¹ *The Standish Group International, Inc. CHAOS Summary 2009. Boston, MA 02109: The Standish Group International, Inc., 2009.*

http://www1.standishgroup.com/newsroom/chaos_2009.php 

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