



Project Planning That Saves Time

Improving the Annual Event

A complex recurring event is a perfect candidate for project management improvement. Any achievements and lessons learned can provide enduring value, year-after-year.

In the luxury market for fine watches, the centerpiece annual sales event is held each April in Geneva. Leading wholesalers from around the world come to view fine watches and related luxury goods and to place their orders for the year. The commercial significance is huge and project planning begins early.

For a leading luxury goods manufacturer, the eight-day event accounts for the largest portion of its watch sales. The company had identified a need for improvement in the planning and execution of its critical projects, and had adopted Kepner-Tregoe Project Management corporate-wide. This event would test new skills and measure the value of the systematic Kepner-Tregoe approach.

Each year, planning begins eight months in advance. This year, in addition to regular project goals around sales-staff training, product sales, and delivery targets, the company set two major project improvement goals:

- Stay within budget—something past years often failed to do.
- Reduce or eliminate the unexpected glitches that invariably occur.

Team members balance project tasks with their regular work.

A full-time project manager (PM) was selected and asked to relinquish all other responsibilities for the life of the project. She was charged with overseeing a ten-person, multi-disciplinary project team drawn from marketing, sales, product development, and logistics. Team members continued to combine project work with ongoing job responsibilities.

As project planning began, the PM worked closely with the project sponsor, the director of strategy, to develop a detailed work breakdown schedule (WBS). The entire project included 400 discrete tasks. The project plan addressed everything from the company's event booth, display trays, and meeting rooms, to shipping containers, meeting the precise customs regulations for bringing goods into and out of the host country, and much more.

The WBS helped save time throughout the eight-month project. By closely following the plan, people focused on their tasks in a timely fashion instead of jumping between tasks. They better understood their role within the overall plan. The detailed WBS was a template that made the logical relationships among tasks visible, helping people think beyond the serial nature of the project. It made it clear that if a day were lost to a missed deadline, work had to be accelerated in another area to compensate.



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The systematic upfront planning had a huge impact on the project execution.

Throughout the course of the project there were fewer of the glitches that waste resources and cost money. The project manager used the WBS as the basis for every project meeting. The project plan not only guided the project work, it guided the weekly meetings. Because project team members were forced to focus on the project plan, reporting during meetings was largely limited to any exceptions to the plan. The plan also provided a map for the week's work that lay ahead, allowing any potential deviations or concerns to be discussed in advance.

In past years, meetings had dragged on for hours. This year, the meetings averaged about 45, well-focused minutes. The diverse team members, many of whom were senior to the PM, came to look forward to the meetings because discussion was limited to the relevant issues at hand. Over the course of the project, the total people hours saved in meetings alone equaled a full five weeks of work.

Better planning also built previously undocumented tasks into the project. Activities like briefing the staff, gaining design approval, and measuring success were scheduled and fully documented.

Six weeks were eliminated from the actual project execution.

Team members were able to complete their project tasks without sacrificing their regular responsibilities. The future pay-off will be a greater willingness to participate in projects based on the knowledge that each participant's time commitment will be accurately scheduled into the project.

The company achieved its on-budget, reduced-glitches goal and an additional, unanticipated benefit: tremendous time savings throughout the course of the project. The project close-out documented measures of success—including a 50% increase in sales—and identified areas for improvement next year.

This project raised the bar for future efforts.

New project skills may not result in dramatic improvements every year. But they permanently raised the standards to a new level of detailed project planning, efficient execution, and acceptable results. For a critical annual project, this creates enduring, measurable value.

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