

: *How should decision support projects be managed?*

by Dan Power

Editor, DSSResources.com

Since the early 1950s, much has been written about project management. This literature prescribes generic steps and issues associated with a broad class of projects. In general, a project is a discreet, goal-oriented task or endeavor. A decision support project has a more specific goal of supporting decision making, but there are many ways to do that using a variety of technologies. A decision support project varies in terms of what decision will be supported, what decision makers will use the system, when and how it will be used and what type of decision support will be provided. Also, the technology solution may be poorly understood. Decision support projects are often hard to structure and manage. Moving from an informal exploration of a suggestion for support to a formal project is an important step.

A senior manager interested in a decision support idea should designate a project manager or request that Information Technology management assign an appropriate person. A project manager brings skills to scope and plan the project. Also, a project manager is expected to set and achieve project goals and objectives on time, within budget and at an agreed upon quality level. Project managers also attempt to optimize the allocation, use and integration of inputs including staff, technology and software. A good project manager can adapt as a decision support project evolves.

The initial tasks of the project manager include diagnosis, a feasibility study, and a definition of the objectives and scope of the proposed project. Once these steps are done then the executive sponsor needs to choose to push the project or postpone any further work on the project. Depending upon the scope of the decision support project, an executive sponsor may be able to directly fund the project or funding may be budgeted as part of business and information systems planning. The larger the scope of the proposed project the more important it is to receive widespread agreement and sponsorship of the project. The objectives of a large-scope decision support project must be strategically motivated, should have strong executive support and must meet a business need. Large scope projects may benefit from having co-project managers: 1) a business unit manager and 2) an IT manager. If co-managers are designated, clear authority and responsibility guidelines should be established.

Once a project is approved then a methodology and project plan needs to be developed and a project team needs to be assembled. If the project will be outsourced, then a process needs to be developed for creating a request-for-proposals and then evaluating proposals. If the development will occur in-house, then development tools and technical issues need to be resolved. The feasibility analysis should have determined if it is appropriate for the project to be completed in-house.

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User requirements need to be specified in some detail. For large projects the information technology architecture must be specified and any changes or additions to the Information Systems and Information Technology (IS/IT) infrastructure must be planned. Once these crucial preliminaries are completed then systems design or prototyping can occur. The project tasks will not be completed in a simple, linear sequence and the project manager must actively manage the project. Whenever possible, the project manager and in some cases a co-project manager from the business area most affected should consult and work with other potential users. The project manager must keep the executive sponsor informed. If problems are occurring or might occur, the sponsor needs to be alerted in a timely manner. The rule is "no surprises" for the project sponsor.

The project manager should identify tasks that must be completed, resources that are needed and project deliverables. Defining deliverables is especially important for monitoring the progress of the project. Milestones or important project events are also often identified to help non-technical managers monitor a project. The Chief Information Officer (CIO) of a firm and one or more business managers will be monitoring the progress of a large scope or high visibility DSS project. Managers expect results from DSS projects. Understanding and meeting the expectations of managers who will use a DSS is the most important and most difficult part of a DSS project manager's job.

Managing the project is a challenging task. A decision support project manager defines project plans and manages the daily activities associated with the project. The project manager coordinates project resources, the project budget, status reporting, changes in requirements and tasks, relations with vendors, and relations with sponsors, skeptics, and IS/IT staff. A decision support project manager may come from the Information Systems group or from another functional department. In general, a decision support project manager needs strong information technical skills, outstanding people skills and knowledge of the business.

References

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Author: Daniel Power

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