

Mini Case Project Management at MM²

² Smith, H. A., and J. D. McKeen. "Project Management at MM." #1-L05-1-009, Queen's School of Business, November 2005. Reproduced by permission of Queen's University, School of Business, Kingston, Ontario.

"We've got a real 'warm puppy' here," Brian Smith told Werner McCann. "Make sure you make the most of it. We could use a winner."

Smith was MM's CIO, and McCann was his top project manager. The puppy in question was MM's new venture into direct-to-customer marketing of its *green meters*, a product designed to help better manage electrical consumption, and the term referred to the project's wide appeal. The strategy had been a hit with analysts ever since it had been revealed to the financial community, and the company's stock was doing extremely well as a result. "At last," one had written in his popular newsletter, "we have a company that is willing to put power literally and figuratively in consumers' hands. If MM can deliver on its promises, we fully expect this company to reap the rewards."

Needless to say, the Green project was popular internally, too. "I'm giving it to you because you have the most project-management experience we've got," Smith had said. "There's a lot riding on this one." As he walked away from Smith's office, McCann wasn't sure whether to feel complimented or terrified. He had certainly managed some successful projects for the company (previously known as ModMeters) over the past five years but never anything like this one. *That's the problem with project management, he thought. In IT almost every project is completely different. Experience only takes you part of the way.*

And Green was different. It was the first truly enterprisewide project the company had ever done, and McCann was having conniptions as he thought about telling Fred Tompkins, the powerful head of manufacturing, that he might not be able to have everything his own way. McCann knew that, to be successful, this project had to take an outside-in approach—that is, to take the end customers' point of view on the company. That meant integrating marketing, ordering, manufacturing, shipping, and service into one seamless process that wouldn't bounce the customer from one department to another in the company. MM had always had separate systems for each of its "silos," and this project would work against the company's traditional culture and processes. The Green project was also going to have to integrate with IT's information management renewal (IMR) project. Separate silos had always meant separate databases, and the IMR project was supposed to resolve inconsistencies among them and provide accurate and integrated information to different parts of the company. This was a huge political challenge, but, unless it worked, McCann couldn't deliver on his mandate.

Then there was the issue of resources. McCann groaned at the thought. MM had some good people but not enough to get through all of the projects in the IT plan within the promised timelines. Because of the importance of the Green project, he knew he'd get good cooperation on staffing, but the fact remained that he would have to go outside for some of the technical skills he needed to get the job done. Finally, there was the schedule that had to be met. Somehow, during the preliminary assessment phase, it had become clear that September 5 was to be the "hard launch" date. There were good reasons for this—the fall was when consumers usually became concerned with their energy consumption—but McCann worried that a date barely twelve months from now would put too much pressure on his team. "We've got to get in there

first, before the competition,” Smith had said to him. “The board expects us to deliver. You’ve got my backing and the support of the full executive team, but you *have* to deliver this one.”

Six Weeks Later

It was full steam ahead on the Green project. It’s *amazing* what a board mandate and executive sponsorship can do for a project, thought McCann, who knew how hard it usually was to get business attention to IT initiatives. He now had a full-time business counterpart, Raj Sambamurthy. Samba, as he was known to his colleagues, had come out of Tompkins’s division and was doing a fantastic job of getting the right people in the room to make the decisions they needed to move ahead. The Green steering committee was no Mickey Mouse group either. Smith, Tompkins, and every VP affected by the project were meeting biweekly with him and Samba to review every aspect of the project’s progress.

McCann had pulled no punches when communicating with the committee. “You’ve given me the mandate and the budget to get this project off the ground,” he had told them. “But we have to be clear about what we’re trying to accomplish.” Together, they had hammered out a value proposition that emphasized the strategic value of the project and some of the measures they would use to monitor its ultimate success. The requirements and design phase had also gone smoothly because everyone was so motivated to ensure the project’s success. “Linking success to *all* our annual bonuses sure helped *that!*” McCann had remarked wryly to Samba.

Now McCann was beginning to pull together his dream team of implementers. The team had chosen a package known as Web-4-U as the front end of the project, but it would take a lot of work to customize it to suit their unique product and, even more, to integrate it with MM’s outmoded back-end systems. The Web-4-U company was based in Ireland but had promised to provide 24/7 consultation on an as-needed basis. In addition, Samba had now assembled a small team of business analysts to work on the business processes they would need. They were working out of the firm’s Cloverdale office, a thirty-minute drive from IT’s downtown location. (It was a shame they couldn’t all be together, but space was at a premium at headquarters.

McCann made a mental note to look into some new collaboration software he’d heard about.)

Now that these two pieces were in place, McCann felt free to focus on the technical “guts” of the system. “Maybe this will work out after all,” he said.

Three Months to Launch Date

By June, however, McCann was tearing out what little hair was left on his head. He was seriously considering moving to a remote Peruvian hamlet and breeding llamas.

“*Anything* would be better than this mess,” he told Yung Lee, the senior IT architect, over coffee. They were poring over the project’s critical path. “The way I see it,” Lee stated matter-of-factly, “we have two choices: We can continue with this inferior technology and meet our deadline but not deliver on our functionality, *or* we can redo the plan and go back to the steering committee with a revised delivery date and budget.”

McCann sighed. Techies *always* saw things in black and white, but his world contained much more gray. And so much was riding on this—credibility (his, IT’s, the company’s), competitiveness, and stock price. He dreaded being the bearer of this bad news, so he said, “Let’s go over this *one* more time.”

"It's not going to get any better, but here goes." Lee took a deep breath. "Web-4-U is based on outmoded technology. It was the best available last year, but *this* year the industry has agreed on a new standard, and if we persist in using Web-4-U, we are going to be out of date before Green even hits the street. We need to go back and completely rethink our technical approach based on the new standard and then redesign our Web interface. I know it's a setback and expensive, but it has to be done." "How come we didn't know about this earlier?" McCann demanded.

Lee replied, "When the standard was announced, we didn't realize what the implications were at first. It was only in our quarterly architecture meeting that the subject came up. That's why I'm here now." The architects were a breed apart, thought McCann. All tech and *no* business sense. They'd lost almost three months because of this. "By the way," Lee concluded, "Web-4-U knew about this, too. They're scrambling to rewrite their code. I guess they figured if you didn't know right away, there would be more chance of you sticking with them."

The chances of *that* are slim to none, thought McCann. His *next* software provider, whoever that was, was going to be sitting right here under his steely gaze. Seeing an agitated Wendy Chan at his door, he brought the meeting to a hasty close. "I'm going to have to discuss this with Brian," he told Lee. "We can't surprise him with this at the steering committee meeting. Hang tight for a couple of days, and I'll get back to you." "OK," said Lee, "but remember that we're wasting time."

Easy for *you* to say, thought McCann as he gestured Chan into his office. She was his counterpart at the IMR project, and they had always had a good working relationship. "I just wanted to give you a heads-up that we've got a serious problem at IMR that will affect you," she began. Llamas began prancing into his mind's eye. "Tompkins is refusing to switch to our new data dictionary. We've spent months hammering this out with the team, but he says he wasn't kept informed about the implications of the changes, and now he's refusing to play ball. I don't know *how* he could say that. He's had a rep on the team from the beginning, and we've been sending him regular progress reports."

McCann was copied on those reports. Their pages of techno-jargon would put *anyone* to sleep! He was sure that Tompkins had never got past the first page of any of those reports. His rep was a dweeb, too, someone Tompkins thought he could live without in his daily operations.

"Damn! This is something I *don't* need." Like all IT guys, McCann *hated* corporate politics with a passion. He didn't understand them and wasn't good at them. Why hadn't Samba and his team picked up on this? They were plugged into the business. Now he was going to have to deal with Chan's problem as well as his own if he wanted to get the Green project going. Their back-end processes wouldn't work at all unless everyone was using the same information in the same format. Why couldn't Tompkins see that? Did he *want* the Green project to fail?

"The best way to deal with this one," advised Chan, "is to *force* him to accept these changes. Go to John Johnson and tell him that you need Tompkins to change his business processes to fit our data dictionary. It's for the good of the company, after all." Chan's strong suit wasn't her political savvy.

“You’re right that we need Tompkins on our side,” said McCann, “but there may be a better way. Let me talk to Samba. He’s got his ear to the ground in the business. I’ll speak with him and get back to you.”

After a bit of chitchat, Wendy Chan left McCann to his PERT chart, trying again to determine the extra cost in time if they went with the new technology. Just then the phone rang. It was Linda Perkins, McCann’s newly hired work-at-home usability designer. She was one of the best in the business, and he was lucky to have snagged her just coming off maternity leave. His promise of flexible working hours and full benefits had lured her back to work two months before her year-long leave ended. “You’ve *got* to do something about your HR department!” Perkins announced. “They’ve just told me that I’m not eligible for health and dental benefits because I don’t work on the premises! Furthermore, they want to classify me as contingent staff, not managerial, because I don’t fit in one of their petty little categories for employees. You promised me that you had covered all this before I took the job! I gave up a good job at LifeCo so I could work from home.”

McCann had indeed covered this issue in principle with Rick Morrow, IT’s HR representative, but that had been almost eight months ago. Morrow had since left the firm. McCann wondered if he had left any paperwork on this matter. The HR IT spot had not yet been filled, and all of the IT managers were upset about HR’s unreceptive attitude when it came to adapting its policies to the realities of today’s IT world. “OK, Linda, just hang in there for a day or two and I’ll get this all sorted out,” he promised. “How’s the usability testing coming along?”

“That’s *another* thing I wanted to talk with you about. The team’s making changes to the look and feel of the product without consulting me,” she fumed. “I can’t do my job without being in the loop. You *have* to make them tell me when they’re doing things like this.”

McCann sighed. Getting Perkins on the project had been such a coup that he hadn’t given much thought to how the lines of communication would work within such a large team. “I hear you, Linda, and we’ll work this out. Can you just give me a few days to figure out how we can improve things?”

Hanging up, he grabbed his jacket and slunk out of the office as quickly as he could before any other problems could present themselves. If he just kept walking south, he’d make it to the Andes in three, maybe four, months. He could teach himself Spanish along the way. At least the llamas would appreciate his efforts! MM could take its project and give it to some other poor schmuck. *No way* was he going back! He walked furiously down the street, mentally ticking off the reasons he had been a fool to fall for Smith’s sweet talk. Then, unbidden, a plan of attack formed in his head. Walking always did the trick. Getting out of the office cleared his head and focused his priorities. He turned back the way he had come, now eager to get back in the fray. He had some things to do right away, and others he had to put in place ASAP.

Discussion Questions

1. Some organizational factors increase a project’s likelihood of success. Identify these “facilitators” for the Green project.

2. Other organizational factors decrease a project's likelihood of success. Identify these "barriers" for the Green project.
3. Outline the things that McCann needs to do right away.