

# 10 MANAGE MULTIPLE PROJECTS AT THE SAME TIME

Unless you are working on one very big project, it's likely that you'll have multiple smaller projects on the go at the same time. Keeping track of what is happening on what project can be a challenge, as can balancing the priorities between them. Sometimes it is a case of working on the project for the sponsor who is shouting the loudest, but that's not a great way to prioritise your work.

## JUGGLING TECHNIQUES



Gina George is the only project manager for her company's Call Centre/Public Safety division, which implements server-based recording, agent evaluation and workforce optimisation systems throughout North America. 'Although there are some seasonal fluctuations, I average about 15 active new or upgrade implementations at any given time,' she says. 'Another four to five projects are typically in some state of monitoring and can't be closed due to an issue like an unforeseen software problem.' In the first half of 2012, Gina managed 40 projects to closure, so she knows how to keep on top of multiple projects.

'When I took over this role I was able to put some systems in place that help me keep track of new projects coming in,' she explains. 'Nevertheless, managing multiple projects is a herculean task at times. I do pretty well when my project count is between 10 and 12, but on those occasions when it has crept closer to 18 to 20, I simply am not able to attend to every detail in the way I would like.'

Gina relies on automated calendar events and tasks to keep on top of things, and she also has great technical leads who can help pick up the slack. 'Administrative details are the most likely to be missed as I don't have good back-up there,' she says.

Excellent record keeping helps her keep track of progress on multiple projects. Gina begins each project by creating a project workbook in a spreadsheet package. This is uploaded to the Microsoft SharePoint site where the working copy is maintained for the life of the project.

'Because we're not yet a paperless company, I also keep a project folder,' Gina explains. 'While the project is in progress, these folders reside in my office and each has a post-it attached to the front with key project information, milestones and completion dates. At the project's end, this converts into a permanent folder of customer information.'

While Gina's systems help her track her projects effectively, there are occasionally times where something falls through the cracks. 'In the not so recent past, I had a technician fly into a site only to find that the server had never been shipped from our office,' Gina confesses. 'The error occurred because I skipped a checklist before going out of town for training. The short answer to what I'd have done differently is not skip the checklist! But what I'd prefer to do differently is have an administrative support person who can handle this type of detail on a continuing basis. Unfortunately, we are the typical "do more with less" company so that's likely not in the cards.'

Gina finds it interesting that more and more advertisements for project managers stress the need to manage multiple projects, while a growing body of evidence suggests that multi-tasking is not the most efficient way to work. 'I wonder if these companies realise that managing a single project requires significant multi-tasking,' she says. 'There comes a point when the multi-multi-tasking required to manage the number of projects I do will inevitably result in project failure, burnout, or both. Having said that, I love my job. I only want to love it more efficiently.'

Small projects have some characteristics in common. According to Sandra Rowe in her book *Project Management for Small Projects*,<sup>85</sup> small projects typically have:

- a duration of less than six months;
- fewer than 10 team members working on them on a part-time basis;
- a single objective with a clear scope and straightforward deliverables;
- a single decision maker, and;
- few interdependencies in skill areas.

That may sound relatively straightforward to manage, and by itself one small project is. However, when you have to manage multiple projects you start to hit additional challenges such as:

- Not having enough time to manage the workload effectively.
- Having to multi-task every day.
- Not being able to access the right resources in a timely fashion.
- Having to manage shared, common resources who are not dedicated to your project and who get pulled onto higher priority work at a moment's notice.
- Being on your own with little support and still expected to deliver to the agreed deadline.

If you have been in a situation where you have had to manage multiple, unrelated projects then you can probably think of other challenges too.

It's worth a quick look at the dangers of multi-tasking. Research from the University of California<sup>86</sup> shows that most people are interrupted regardless of what they are working