



## White Paper 2012-28

### How too much Detailed Planning often Kills Project Success (Why the Budgeting Plan Cannot be Used for Project Execution)

*Throughout our consulting assignments on Large, Complex Projects in execution phase we've encountered too often an astonishing phenomenon: excessively detailed planning, impeding proper update, control and decision-making in the project. In this White Paper we investigate the causes of this phenomenon, why it is so much of a concern and how to overcome this issue*

In the matter of planning, this quote from Eisenhower is always worth remembering: *"In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless but planning is indispensable"*. Planning must be done properly so as to enable to identify project drivers. At the same time it must keep agility and reactivity intact as unexpected events will always happen during project execution.

It is extremely important to optimize the detail level for project planning between two extremes which are equally damaging for project success

#### Usual issues with too little detail in project planning

Too little detail in project planning will not allow the project team to understand what are really the drivers of the project. It will lead to the following issues:

- No proper identification of critical path and, more generally, of the drivers and constraints of the project
- No proper identification of resource requirements;
- Poor anticipation of interfaces between activities and contributors;
- Poor progress update due to insufficient granularity of baseline planning;
- Generally, excessive optimism regarding project execution;
- Insufficient baseline for actual progress measurement and control of the project.

#### The curse of too detailed planning

We encounter astonishingly quite often excessively detailed planning in large, complex projects. This results in overall project execution plans often reaching 8,000 to 10,000 activities or more, organized by disciplines and not by deliverable, reaching the limit of the manageable.

This practice has a lot of drawbacks – for example upon closer examination, due to the sheer size of the schedule, independent reviews often show that the linkages between activities are not always representatives of the logic of the project resulting in incorrect logic.

In terms of project execution we often come up with situations where the project planning update is not representative of the actual activity progress that can be observed on the ground, and not any more used for decision-making by the senior project management! This

is of course a sure recipe for disaster – and it is astounding how often we encounter this situation during our consulting assignments!

#### Planning reloaded: what is the purpose of planning during project execution?

Beyond the initial input into resourcing and budgeting, the project plan during project execution ultimately serves to take decisions. To achieve this, it needs to:

- represent effectively, at any time, the execution plan of the project, taking into account any decision regarding changes of plans, new or changed activities or logic,
- and be rigorously updated as to the actual progress of the project tasks.

A project is a time-sensitive endeavour, and both tasks need to be done in real time within each reporting period to ensure that decision making is based on a sound reference. The scope of work to be done during each reporting period needs thus to be commensurate with the resources available to carry them out.

Just for the schedule update, if we suppose conservatively that only 20% of the project activities are live at any given moment, and that to carry out a reliable progress update verified through discussions with the responsible people verifying the logic links etc, a planner can update 10 activities for every hour, for 10 days a month (the rest of the time being spent reporting etc), the schedule cannot have more than 4,000 activities in total. Depending on the planning resources and their tasks, we see that there is a limit to what can be effectively managed in terms of execution plan.

#### The project execution planning needs to be different from the pre-execution planning

The root cause of too detailed planning is often the slow decision-making process which always precedes the start of the execution of such projects, which leads the team to develop ever more detailed overall project plans. Sometimes the time available is even used to increase the details of the plans instead of concentrating on work that would be more effective, like resource loading the plan and seeking resource optimization.

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needs for execution. Because it is essentially used for resourcing it is often discipline-based and not deliverable-based; and disciplines want to go into much detail at the budgeting stage, detail which will not be so useful during project execution.

A key deliverable at project startup is thus to tailor the project plan to make sure it is of a suitable detail level to be used appropriately during project execution. Criteria for this execution schedule (often referred to as project execution level 3 schedule) could be, for example:

- Not more than 3,000 activities to remain manageable, with clear critical path and rigorous check of the logic
- Activities should generally have a minimum duration of 2 or 3 reporting cycles to allow for meaningful progress tracking, but not much longer than 5 or 6 reporting cycles to allow a precise update;
- Activities should be grouped logically by deliverables, and not by discipline/ department to allow proper convergence monitoring.

During the course of the project, more detailed plans will be developed for certain disciplines and operations, for short periods of time; but the main schedule used for the decision-making on the project should remain of a relatively limited complication.

**It is important to underline that excessive detail is also an impediment to project success.**

### The agility imperative

In projects in general, and even more so in complex projects, planning agility is an imperative. It is necessary to be able to run alternate scenarios and schedule risk analysis as decision-making input on a regular and short notice basis. It is necessary to be able to modify the project planning as circumstances require it without spending 3 months for a schedule re-baseline because of the sheer work involved in re-linking all the activities. In general, the project execution schedule needs to remain manageable to allow planning agility. It is an other reason while at execution stage, the project planning complication needs to be limited.

### Conclusion: Striking the right balance for project planning between Charybdis and Scylla

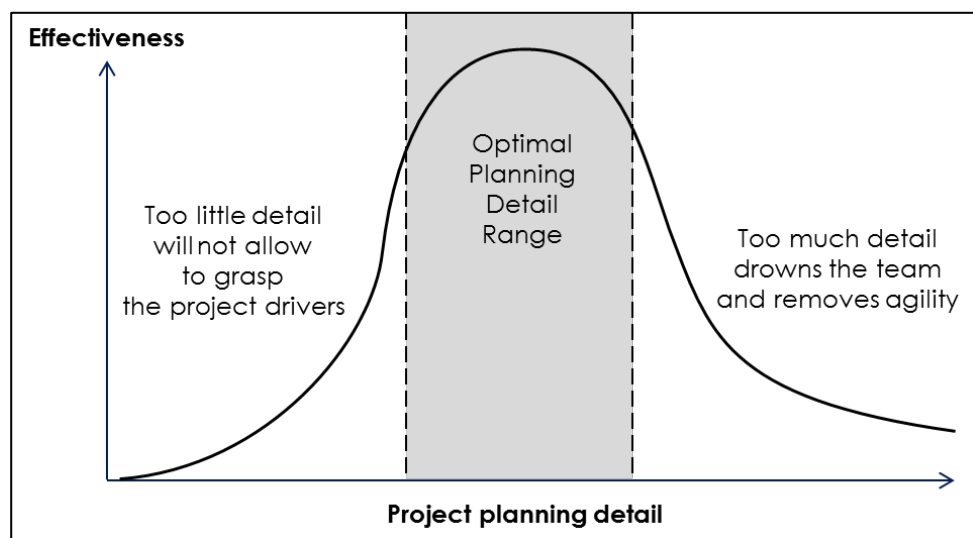
While the issues related to too little detail are well known, it is important to underline that excessive detail is also an impediment to project success, because it drowns the project team into lots of activity that does not add value when it comes to driving the project execution:

- Project Team spends too much time planning and defers important long lead activities
- Lack of plan overview and understanding of the main drivers due to excessive detail and possibly difficult to manipulate plan format
- Excessively detailed plan proves difficult to accurately update regarding progress at the expected update frequency
- Lack of agility and reactivity when unexpected events happen

Hence contrary to common knowledge, more detail is not necessarily good. A balance needs to be sought to ensure the maximum effectiveness for the team.

To achieve this on large, complex projects it is necessary to revisit the common assumption that the project plan developed in the pre-execution stage will be used during project execution. Their purposes are different. A project execution plan tailored to the requirements of project execution needs to be a key deliverable upon project startup to allow sound decision-making and execution agility.

Excessive simplification is the enemy of success. So is excessive complication. Strike the right balance. It is something of an art. Take the time to get the right balance at the beginning of project execution. It is necessary for the success of your project.



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