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RESEARCH NOTE PROJECT MANAGEMENT: BEYOND THE PROJECT

THE BOTTOM LINE

Taking a closer look at your technology strategy to support project management may uncover quick opportunities for improving ROI. Looking beyond the current project management solution – and beyond the users that use it – is a key place to start.

The evolution of project management tools and the availability of on-demand solutions for project management provide companies with more project management options than ever before. Nucleus has found project management solutions can deliver ROI by helping companies cut project costs, accelerate processes, and provide greater visibility of projects across the organization — provided they're deployed and used properly.

However, the greatest challenge for many project management deployments is still effective user adoption: not just getting users to use the solution, but ensuring they use it effectively. Whether you're evaluating a project management solution today or trying to maximize the value of an existing solution, Nucleus has identified a few quick strategies that can help ensure you're on the right track.

The first step is to identify where you are today. Most companies fit into one of three basic categories:

- They have a project management solution in place that is broadly used for project managers.
- They have project management tools in place but they're not broadly used, and have a lot of parallel workarounds like homegrown linked spreadsheets that are used in pockets of the organization.
- They haven't found an appropriate cost-effective project management tool, and are using a number of homegrown solutions.

IF YOU HAVE A SOLUTION THAT'S WORKING

Congratulations! Give yourself a big pat on the back – and then a little push to look for opportunities to leverage your solution to get even more ROI. Here are a few places to start:

- Leverage to more users. If your project managers are the only ones tracking project progress on a regular basis, they're probably spending a lot of time communicating about progress and the relative success and value of their projects to others. Take a look at how your solution enables users to share information on progress, success, and other key factors with non-users (like board members, shareholders, and executives. If there's not an automated

way to publish that information to PowerPoint or other communication media, you may want to take a look at how you can streamline that process. It will save project managers time and help keep everyone on board.

- Leverage outside the organization. Many companies' projects today include partners, consultants, customers, and other parties. If your project managers don't already have an automated (that's the key) way to keep those parties in the loop, review your project management solution to identify how they can do so. Solutions such as PeopleCube (www.PeopleCube.com) enable project management by integrating the calendars of resources and personnel outside the organization.
- Standardize. Although project managers have a tool, they may be recreating the wheel on similar projects if there aren't standard tools and templates to get them started. Identifying best practices and setting up templates for standard project components can save time for current users, drive consistent quality across projects, and dramatically reduce the learning curve for new project managers.
- Consider additional training. Even if your project management is working, it's likely your users aren't taking advantage of all the solution's capabilities. Gathering a "wish list" of what project managers would like to improve and identifying opportunities to provide training around the functionality in those areas can give a quick boost to productivity.
- Manage your vendor. How long has it been since you asked your salesperson to update you on upcoming upgrades or releases, or to provide suggestions on how you could expand or improve your deployment? If it's been a while, it may be worth it to let them know you're reevaluating their solution. You may find there are things around the corner you want to plan for, best practices they have with similar clients that you can implement, or an opportunity to push some of those items on your project managers' wish lists onto their development priorities.
- Network. While you're talking with your vendor, ask for some customer contacts with similar situations or needs. A quick call with them may yield interesting insights on how you can leverage the same solution for greater value. Making this request will help you gain some leverage for vendor management as well: you also want to gain insight on what others are paying for maintenance and what they're hearing from your vendor which can put you in a better position in vendor negotiations in the future.

IF YOU'RE NOT EFFECTIVELY USING WHAT YOU HAVE

You have a user adoption issue, and it's probably not too difficult to identify why: just ask a few users that aren't using (a good strategy is to start with those rebels that have created their own homegrown workarounds – they're likely to be the most articulate on what your current solution is missing). It may be as simple as a training issue, or you may need to reconsider your project management technology strategy.

The good news is that you have a lot more options than you used to: many vendors have invested significant development to make their solutions easier to use, and the growth of on-demand project management tools may mean you have some simple cost-effective options that you can try with limited risk. Some on-

demand solutions to explore include eProject (www.eProject.com), Project Arena (www.projectarena.com), and AtTask (www.attask.com).

You may want to take a look at testing tools to replace those homegrown options with on-demand or other solutions and accepting that a hybrid environment – some of your existing solution and some pockets of tools that are less costly, have specific needed functionality, or are easier to use – can help you further standardize consistency and quality across projects.

You should also consider calling in your vendor to help you evaluate why your solution of choice isn't working for you. Don't be afraid to squeak! A small investment in services or training may help bring others into the fold of happy users, and they may have other suggestions (or customers that have suggestions) on how you can better tackle the adoption issues and drive greater use and ROI from your solution.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS TODAY

It's probably time to take a closer look:

- If your justification for not investing in project management solutions before was that they were too expensive to deliver ROI, you may want to take a look at some of the on-demand project management solutions that can deliver visibility and consistency at a significantly lower upfront and ongoing cost. Solutions like Project Arena may be good choice for exploration.
- If you haven't invested in project management because your potential users didn't want it, there are a lot of project manager productivity tools that you may want to provide access to help individual project managers be more productive.
- If you haven't looked at project management because your projects are too inconsistent to follow a standard process, you may want to look at collaborative tools that will enable you to capture the best practices of those projects and drive some standardization, which will help new project managers catch up and drive productivity across teams. This can be particularly helpful in the front end of new product development processes where teams are evaluating a number of options for product direction. Sopheon's solution, for example, looks at gathering all the unstructured information to better manage the stage gating process for new designs and products.

Wherever you are in the success of your project management technology, there's always room for improvement. Taking a few minutes to gauge where you are and where there are opportunities for improvement can help you take advantage of the new developments in the project management technology space and ensure you maximize the returns your organization receives from its projects.