



5 Reasons Projects Fail

How To Ensure Your Team Is Set Up For Success

A Guide to Project Management





Only 2.5% of companies successfully complete 100% of their projects.*

* PwC. [Project Management: Improving performance, reducing risk](#)

This stat might be troubling, but there's a silver lining. You can be in the top 3% of best-performing companies simply by completing most, if not all, of your projects.

With so many moving pieces, it can be hard to see the warning signs building up that eventually lead your project towards failure.

This eBook breaks down five factors that can cause projects to fail and what you can do to avoid them.

① Unclear Project Objectives

37% of projects businesses undertake fail due to unclear project objectives and milestones.

-Pulse of the Professional Annual Report (PMI)

A lack of direction and unclear goals are some of the biggest reasons projects fail. Businesses who fail to plan for projects don't just waste employee efforts and time—they also waste money. Approximately 10% of every dollar a business spends is wasted as a result of poor project management efforts.

In work environments where company targets and goals are in constant flux, clearly defined project objectives help bring calm to the chaos and radically increase the odds of success.

So how do you get started? Here are some guidelines to effectively defining and communicating objectives:



Understand the difference between goals and objectives

Think of a goal as the outcome you're working toward, while an objective is a step you take to reach that goal. **Objectives are equally imperative to project success, especially in companies with shifting priorities.** Here are some key reasons why:

They de-stress your team and increase productivity. Being overwhelmed by the larger view of a project is why many people procrastinate. But when they can see the project in actionable chunks, there is a greater sense of control. And it's easier to focus on the next step in front of them.

When grouped together in project phases, objectives allow for natural review periods. At the completion of each phase, you can review the project to make sure it's on-track with initial project goals, scope, budget, etc. With many built-in phases for review, there are plenty of opportunities for course correction before a project gets too far along.



Establish clear deadlines and roles

A Gallup report found **only 33% of people know what is expected of them from their jobs.** This lack of clarity is a major contributor to project struggles and failure.

The solution to this problem is to define roles and responsibilities and assign clear objectives to specific team members

Identify what tools will be used for data management and collaboration.

Where do you want your data to live? What platforms will be used and who will have access to them? It's vital that you know where all your project information exists, and who has control of it or access to it.

② Poor Progress Tracking & Management

Only 23% of organizations use standardized project management practices across the entire organization.

- *Project Management Institute (PMI)*

Effective project management tracking comes down to staying organized. It's easy to get lost in data overload. A comprehensive look at the problem of lost information by Xenit, a Belgian-based IT company, noted that “[In 2012], McKinsey reported that **‘employees spend 1.8 hours every day—9.3 hours per week, on average—searching and gathering information.’**”

Six years later, a review revealed the issue had not improved: A study by Nintex showed that **49% of 1,000 employees surveyed said they struggled to locate documents related to their work**, and **43% also struggled with issues of document sharing and document approval requests**.

While successful project management should efficiently track changes to keep everyone on your team accountable, project tracking is more than established checkpoints and milestones—it's creating a system for monitoring completed tasks, reporting truthfully on whether or not they were successfully completed, and what, if any, problems were encountered.

With a good tracking system in place, it's nearly impossible for unfinished tasks or missed deadlines to slip through the cracks unnoticed.



Here are some specific ways of measuring progress:

- 1 “Earned Value” management:** This technique monitors progress by comparing how much time and budget should have been spent versus the amount of actual work done to date.
- 2 Milestones:** Milestones can be any significant checkpoint or phase (task, event, decision, etc.) in the project lifecycle.
- 3 Status reports:** Regular status reports help managers monitor progress. They track whether the project’s initial goals can still be met after a certain period of time, or if adjustments need to be made as a result of changing circumstances. They also help to monitor team performance and enable managers to quickly step in when a problem arises.
- 4 Data integration with software:** As projects grow in size and complexity, tracking the progress of potentially hundreds of stakeholders can be cumbersome. Good project management software helps automate everything from project tracking to request approvals. It can also notify stakeholders when changes occur and provide teams with real-time status updates and analytics.



Scope creep

A 2017 PMI report found that nearly **50% of business projects experience scope creep**. Management, clients, or even vendors are known to add requirements to a project after it is already underway. But with a proper tracking system, you can tell which add-ons are realistic and which ones require additional time or budget.

③ Weak Communication

Ineffective communication is the primary contributor to project failure one third of the time, and had a negative impact on project success more than half the time.

- *Project Management Institute (PMI)*

Good communication is more than timeliness and tone—it's about where it's happening. There are a myriad of ways team members communicate with each other—email, text, Slack, Zoom, Skype, phone calls, in-person, etc. A mix of these communication tools is typically used, depending on urgency or importance. The problem with that is when one of those communications needs to be recalled to successfully complete a project. How can a project succeed when an important conversation was held over a private Slack channel, but the information related to it is shared via an email chain?

Conversations that happen over multiple channels are nearly impossible to track. This leads to delays in data sharing, missed points for collaboration, loss of accountability, and a lack of understanding for the challenges others are facing. Repeat conversations are another challenge—someone not privy to an earlier conversation between two people sends an email asking their colleagues the same question that was answered somewhere else.

Overall, 39% of employees felt their organization suffered from broken document management processes.

[-Definitive Guide to America's Most Broken Processes, Nintex](#)

Software automation tools can solve this by keeping all your documents in one centralized location that's easily searchable and attached to a specific checkpoint or milestone.



What's a team to do?

For teams facing an office environment with multiple channels, there are a few actions that can help minimize miscommunication:

1 Get overly organized

Organize all your interactions—agendas, meeting minutes, and action items are all incredibly valuable and should be highly documented. Decide what information will be tracked, who is in charge of tracking it, how it will be tracked and where it will be stored. This information should be available to everyone at all times.

Providing access to in-progress conversations helps team members stay on track while also avoiding repeat conversations or having to ask where needed information can be found.

2 Get ahead of assumptions or miscommunication

Remove assumptions by communicating project objectives early on. For a project to succeed, you need to make sure management, the team, and stakeholders all agree on a definition of success from the very beginning.

3 Map out a chain for reporting

Create a reporting system that team members can use to update stakeholders and management on project progress. Avoid surprises by developing a system that creates accountability every step of the way.

Establishing rules for project collaboration and discussion helps improve communication and set expectations for everyone on the team. It also establishes data management and collaboration habits that reduce future conflict and confusion.

4 Identify how communication channels should be used

Ideally, you can streamline your communication channels into one centralized platform so you don't have to spend time searching for specific conversations across platforms. But that often takes time.

In the meantime, create clear policies for your communication channels about what gets shared where. Conversations about a project provide context that can be just as valuable as the data itself, so creating intentional spaces for discussion is key.

5 More access is better for everyone

From more information comes better decisions. That's true for your team, your department or your company. Complex projects often require collaboration and extensive team involvement to be successful. So it's important to eliminate communication silos and make channels and conversations accessible to all relevant individuals.

④ Lack of Accountability

Only 33% of people know what is expected of them from their jobs.

- Gallup report

Unclear expectations and roles are another project killer. Accountability starts with clearly defining project objectives and ensuring team members know their roles and responsibilities.

And as scope and roles change, it's crucial to continue addressing accountability throughout the project.

Here are some accountability concepts that can determine the success of your projects:

Responsibility vs. Accountability

These terms are often mistaken for meaning the same thing—they don't. Knowing the difference between them can be the difference between a successful project and a failed one.

A responsible team member is defined as an individual assigned a task. Responsibility can be shared. ***An accountable team member is ultimately answerable for the activity or decision.***





Only one accountable person can be assigned to an action. Those responsible for a task are often not the same ones accountable for the success of those tasks.

Project managers must make sure to not only define responsibilities but also understand the structure of accountability within the project. Always ask upfront, “Is there someone accountable for this project task?” If the answer is no, then the project manager is the accountable person until they fill that gap.

To keep teams accountable and build a culture of continuous improvement, it’s important to:

- **Be clear on tasks and who they’re assigned to**
- **Have regular check-ins to assess progress and performance**
- **Acknowledge successes**
- **Identify areas that could use improvement**

Set Expectations

Communication is an important aspect of creating accountability with your team. That starts with setting and managing expectations for all involved, from individual contributors to managers. It is vital that expectations are managed so that there are few mismatches or misunderstandings regarding responsibilities or how performance of those responsibilities will be measured.

For the sake of accountability, always ensure specific tasks have a proper owner who will report on the status of that task going forward. Without agreement on who the owner is, the project will be set up so that the team is responsible, but no one is accountable should something go wrong.



⑤ Unreliable Estimates

While cost estimates are tedious and typically filled with uncertainty, they are vital to a project's success. **Unreliable estimates, whether for cost, scope or time, are among the largest reasons why projects don't deliver on their objectives.**

When projects go way over estimate, it's not only frustrating for stakeholders and project managers, it can harm a company's credibility. And in some cases, it creates a sense of distrust among management and project leaders.

The first step for successful cost estimating is finding the right person to take on the responsibility. Experience matters, as less experienced planners tend to be overly optimistic while more experienced managers will build in the necessary buffer for when something inevitably goes wrong.

Project managers typically follow one of a few tried and true methods to create estimates that are as reliable as possible.



Here are three common methods used:

1

Parametric Estimation

This is one of the simplest methods that estimates projects on a quantitative basis, such as dollars per square foot. But because not everything can be easily quantified, there can be gaping holes in the estimate.

2

Analogous Estimation

Often used early on when not much is known about a project, this method relies on historical information of past projects. Using time or cost estimates from previous projects is a quick and relatively easy method though not always the most accurate.

3

Bottom-up Estimation

The most accurate but most time-consuming method. It requires breaking down each project task into smaller components, such as individual deliverables. The estimates for these smaller chunks, often created by various team members, are combined to create the estimate for the entire project.

The most accurate estimates:

When calculating cost and time estimates for a deliverable, a three-point estimation formula where each team member provides their pessimistic, optimistic and best-guess estimates will help achieve the most accurate results.

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