



CR

PUSHING TO MEET A DEADLINE IS A NECESSARY EVIL, BUT IF IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME, IT USUALLY MEANS SOMETHING IS SERIOUSLY WRONG.

BY TOM SULLIVAN

UNNCH TIME

**WORKING
IN CRUNCH MODE**

is not a particularly pleasant experience. Long days, nights and weekends spent toiling to meet tight deadlines can erode team motivation and ultimately lead to mistakes. If it happens too often, it causes burnout, mutinies, high attrition rates and less-than-stellar project results.

Most project leaders are painfully aware of this. And yet, however often you vow “never again,” even the most finely crafted plans can fall foul of events beyond your control.

“No matter what you do, every project is going to have issues that come up,” says Kirt Gilliland, principal at Irving Hughes/CM, a construction management consultancy in San Diego, California, USA.

But that just makes trying to maintain a normal workload all the more important.

“I try to ensure that we’re doing all the right things to keep at least 90 percent of the project on schedule.”

running smoothly we were able to put the resources on it, take it out of sequence and finish everything else around it. If we’d already been in panic mode when the issue hit, it would have sunk us.”

Keeping staff motivated during a crunch is possible, he says, as long as you don’t “cry wolf” early on in the project and expect teams to put in extra hours and weekends on an ongoing basis.

“You need to be working at a normal pace during most of the project,” Mr. Gilliland says. “If people feel they are being respected and are part of a team that does quality work in a timely fashion, when you need them to put in extra hours or work a weekend, they will rally behind you because they also want the project to succeed.”

To prevent team members from burning out, project managers need to get everyone involved in problem-solving from the project’s inception, says



IF SOMEONE IS PUTTING IN 12 HOURS OR MORE A DAY YOU HAVE TO ASK, ‘WHAT IS THE QUALITY OF THEIR WORK?’ IF A PERSON IS TOO TIRED TO THINK, WHAT ARE THEY DOING FOR THE COMPANY EXACTLY?

—Loren Davie, Alexander Interactive, New York, New York, USA

he says. “That way, when unexpected things happen we can take care of them.”

On a recent \$14 million construction project in downtown San Diego, for example, the project team was digging in the street to finish some underground utility work before paving it over. “Then we discovered a 4-inch gas main that wasn’t supposed to be there,” Mr. Gilliland says. “The problem set us back two weeks, but because everything else was

Angela Reid, head of member services project management at internet giant AOL UK, Waterford, Ireland.

“Involving teams in discussions from the start helps you to avoid surprises later on. When issues hit, you get the team to come up with solutions. So when you get to the stage where you’re looking for workarounds and overtime, you’ve already negotiated their buy-in,” she says.

“But if all your projects are up against extremely tight deadlines, something is wrong and you need to look at your project structure,” Ms. Reid says. “One of the biggest problems project managers face is perfectionism—getting too involved in project details. You might need to take a step back and manage your milestones at a higher level.”

If an organization is constantly rushing to make deadlines, it may be that it is an acceptable part of the corporate culture, says Yoong Fook Loy, operations director and process improvement consultant at Pivotal Resources, a Singapore-based global consulting and training company. The unintended consequence is that people don’t have time to reflect on lessons learned, he says.

“Often the problem is that projects are incorrectly scoped. Sponsors can have very high expectations but not really understand what a team can do,” he says. “Team members have other jobs to do and often can’t commit the time expected of them to a project. Due to the constraints imposed, we’ve learned to focus on just a few important changes and keep certain things constant, even if it means we won’t optimize our resources for the time being.”

Get Real

Over-promising and unrealistic scheduling have contributed to a crunch culture in technology and web-based industries

**TOP 10
REASONS WHY PROJECTS
FALL BEHIND**

- 1 **We’re going to need to change something—no big deal, right?** Projects are often too widely or vaguely scoped, and sponsors lack a clear understanding of what they want.
- 2 **Come on, we can squeeze it in.** Project leaders don’t set up a practical schedule, underestimating how long work will take and adjusting schedules to accommodate setbacks rather than tackling issues as they arise.
- 3 **Who needs risk management?** Potential risks aren’t identified or fully managed from the start.
- 4 **But we had a plan ...** Project leaders don’t have enough project control to handle changes and shift or augment resources when needed.
- 5 **We couldn’t do it without you—no really.** Team members must feel their work is valued and the project manager is involving them. If that’s not the case, don’t be surprised when they declare a mutiny.
- 6 **Hey, where’d my team go?** Team leaders didn’t secure clearly assigned resources and full executive level buy-in, so team members are pulled off the project.
- 7 **The executive crowd moves on.** Senior-level support often has an odd way of disappearing after the initial phase.
- 8 **Can we speed it up?** In hierarchical organizations, the long wait for approvals can delay projects.
- 9 **Mine, mine, mine!** Project managers get bogged down in project details and fail to delegate.
- 10 **Didn’t I tell you that?** All stakeholders must be kept in the loop.



Project managers looking to buy some time are increasingly turning to software.

“It’s a fundamental and it pays for itself,” says Angela Reid, AOL UK. “You don’t need something very sophisticated, but you couldn’t manage a large project and keep everyone in the loop without it.”

But that doesn’t mean project managers are just grabbing the first thing they see on the shelf. For time management software to be of real value, they’ve learned to tinker around with it.

“I added time-logging interfaces to our software and found it very useful, not only for tracking the project but also for the overall visibility of the team,” says Ramam Atmakuri, Invensys. “We can see what progress is being made on the critical path and where we need to redeploy resources. It can also save us time with reporting.”

Loren Davie at Alexander Interactive has written custom applications to adapt his software for resource planning in his company. “We can get a very good sense of who is working on what and see in advance if someone is going to be over allocated so it can help us to avoid crunches,” he says.

“Of course there’s a limit to how well you can use the software to shift resources but you can see if one person has spare cycles and another needs help,” Mr. Davie says. “Life would be a lot harder without it.”

over the last decade, says Loren Davie, technical lead at Alexander Interactive, a New York, New York, USA-based web design company.

And that’s not a good thing.

“If someone is putting in 12 hours or more a day you have to ask, ‘What is the quality of their work?’ If a person is too tired to think, what are they doing for the company exactly? If you’re crunching all the time, that’s a management failure,” he says. “You may not be managing the schedule of projects. You may not have enough staff on projects or you’re systematically underestimating the work involved. It can also be a direct disconnect between planning and execution.”

Although the game development industry is the most notorious for running project teams on 18-hour days, Mr. Davie says new ways of working are blurring the line between time spent on the job and having a personal life for everyone.

“There is a cultural trend—at least in the United States—toward 100 percent availability to your company,” he says. “People walk around with BlackBerrys and smart phones and are expected to answer e-mails at all hours.”

But in today’s age of virtual teams scattered around the globe, project managers must be aware of cultural differences in how teams deal with looming deadlines.

A lack of experienced project managers in West Africa, for example, often means projects in that area perpetually operate in crisis mode, says Paul Kamgang, PMP, IT service delivery at Pecten Cameroon Co., a subsidiary of the petrochemical major Royal Dutch Shell in Douala, Cameroon.

The situation has prompted teams to adapt.

“You cannot tell people in West Africa that they’ve been working too long and need to take a break,” he says. “They won’t understand what you mean as

they’re used to fighting to deliver projects on time and are more than willing to work around the clock. If you tell them they have done enough for the day, they will not understand.”

In India, where the outsourcing industry is growing by more than 30 percent a year,

India, tries to limit his teams to eight-hour days. But toward the end of a project, team members often have to put in a Herculean effort, and that can lower the quality of work.

“We realized on a recent project that we were getting coding errors. The team had reached a kind

TIGHT DEADLINES ARE ACCEPTED AS THE NORM IN THE IT SERVICES INDUSTRY AS SCHEDULES ARE NOT ALWAYS BASED ON GOOD ESTIMATES. TASKS GET PUSHED FORWARD AND PEOPLE EXPECT THE END OF A PROJECT TO BE CHAOTIC AND THAT MIDNIGHT OIL WILL BE BURNED.

—Sandeep Shouche, PMP, BMC Software, Pune, India



project managers increasingly have to monitor teams for signs of burnout. Culturally, Indian team members are far less likely to complain about heavy workloads or raise a red flag when a schedule is slipping.

“Tight deadlines are accepted as the norm in the IT services industry as schedules are not always based on good estimates. Tasks get pushed forward and people expect the end of a project to be chaotic and that midnight oil will be burned,” says Sandeep Shouche, PMP, research and development program manager of BMC Software, a global software product company in Pune, India.

“But we’ve been seeing a lot of people burning out and developing medical conditions over the last couple of years,” he says. “As a project manager you have to be aware of team members’ thresholds.”

Ramam Atmakuri, PMP, head of development of Invensys, a multinational IT company in Hyderabad,

of burnout stage, so we informed the stakeholders of the problem and took the team members off to a resort for a day,” he says. “When the project was completed we did the same thing again. It’s important to celebrate successes and show genuine appreciation for extra efforts. If you give team members a 10,000 rupee bonus, but don’t treat them the right way, they will not care about the money. Recognition is more important than money at times.”

Project managers may never be able to completely eliminate crunches, but they can find ways to help their teams live through them. And they better figure it out before they hear those dreaded words: Time’s up. **PM**

Tom Sullivan is a freelance journalist based in Stockholm, Sweden. He has covered foreign news and business for The South China Morning Post and The Irish Times.