



Developing a Project Schedule

4 Steps to Ensuring Timely Project Execution
By: Ben Egner



**If there's one single truth to project management;
it's that no one project is the same.**

The only commonality is that they all contain three constraints: budget, resources, and time, or “The Project Management Triangle.” These constraints dictate the ebb and flow of the project, and you can't change one without it impacting the others.

In the project management triangle, one particular element is immovable. One that, no matter the circumstance, marches on: time. In a recent poll Greencastle conducted via LinkedIn, we asked participants what their biggest project management challenge was, and a whopping 62% of respondents said time was their biggest challenge. Well, challenge no more.

As certified project management experts, we're going to unlock some project management secrets on how to develop a project schedule that will arm you with the tools you need to navigate challenges that can impede project success.



To a project management team, the project schedule is the timepiece and engine from which the team operates. Prior to executing a project, the schedule serves as a key communication tool to create a common operating picture or a single source of truth and overview for the project. During execution, it serves as a critical work driver and reporting mechanism and after will serve as a key feature in lessons learned.



Creating the ideal schedule will need to account for several variables including, location, the complexity of the nature of work, government regulations, personnel available, and funding to name a few.

And while there isn't a cookie-cutter solution to developing a perfect project schedule, there are a few steps you can take to put you in the best position possible for creating a project schedule that will have you getting work done quicker and more efficiently. We mentioned before that no project is the same, and that reflects all elements of the project management triangle.

Project managers need to work to scale the project timeline based on the size and details of the project. Simple projects may take a couple of months, so developing a schedule may take no more than a day or two, tops. However, a complex, multi-year initiative may take a full team of experienced project managers several months to create.

Whatever the size of your project, following these simple steps will help you develop a project timeline that will have you meeting your objectives on time.

1 *DEFINE PROJECT MILESTONES*

All projects are temporary endeavors to develop some sort of unique result. That unique result will likely be anchored to one or even multiple critical dates. In gaining initial leadership guidance, the project manager will peel back the layers to find which products or services are the highest concern to the leadership, what priority they are, and the delivery dates of these objectives.

These crucial project delivery dates, or milestones, will serve as the pillars which project managers can build a schedule from. These milestones could be dates that signify when a particular deliverable will be completed, or maybe just when critical tasks will take place. There will always be other key dependencies that will need to be uncovered by the project leadership team and the subject matter experts. These dependencies could include new government regulations that the organization is working to meet or even other projects whose scope or resources cross into the same path of the project at hand.

Never be shocked by the number of roadblocks that can be encountered when putting together a project schedule—these roadblocks are normal and part of developing the timeline. With a clear vision of the, “no later than dates” from leadership, the project manager can derive some loose start and finish dates. Add in an understanding of all dependencies impacting the timeline, and now you have a foundation to start building a schedule.

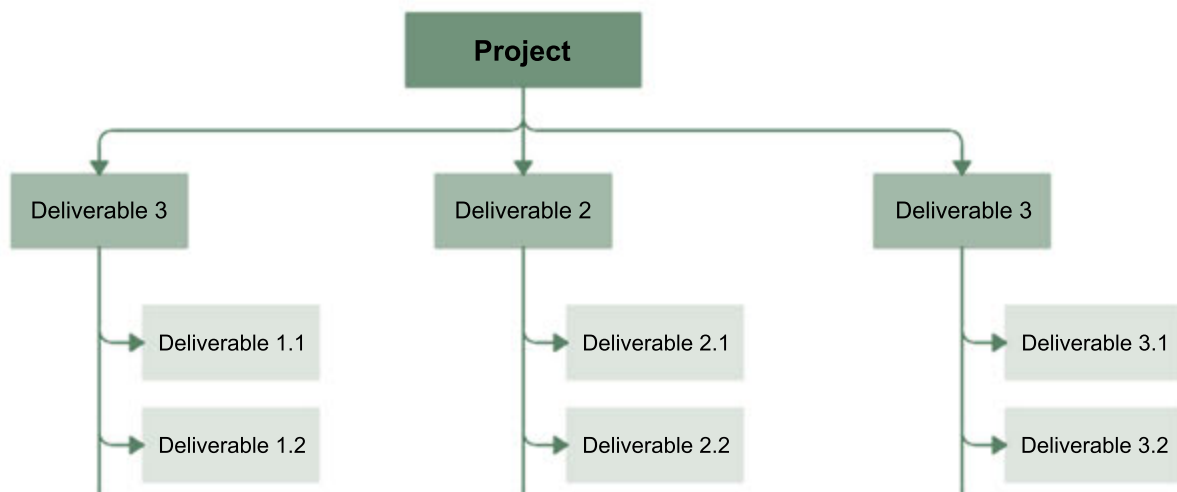


2

DEVELOP A WORK BREAKDOWN STRUCTURE

Now that all of the critical dates are documented, it's time to start thinking about how to execute the work. There are a lot of ways to tackle this, and for large projects, it can seem pretty daunting—after all, this is where the rubber meets the road. Identifying the tasks that need to be executed and when they should be completed by is challenging but can be approached one step and one task at a time.

The milestones and key deliverables are defined by the leadership, so the project manager breaks down these items into manageable and actionable tasks. The output in this step is called the Work Breakdown Structure. In most cases, the project manager is not the foremost subject matter expert on the scope of the project, and should not be expected to be. This is where the organizational subject matter experts come in.



These individuals should be consulted early and often to spell out the technical details surrounding product or service delivery. They should be a project manager's greatest resource in defining not just what tasks need to occur, but also the estimated timing it should take to complete them. These experts may be readily available to the project manager during the planning phase but usually, the best way to drive inputs and estimation is by setting up one or multiple workshops with these experts.

With valuable inputs from the technical experts, the project team will be able to create a complete Work Breakdown Structure and have an understanding of how long these tasks should take to be completed.

3

ASSIGN RESOURCES

The Work Breakdown Structure will provide the project manager with an understanding of all the tasks that will need to be completed during the project, but this information is not enough to assign official start and end times to each task.



Knowing all the work that needs to be completed is useless without having people's bandwidth and capacity to receive work. This is where effective resource management comes in. Every successful project has a successful resource management plan. To ensure the right resources are assigned to the right tasks, the project manager will need to work with resource functional managers or managers within a given organization.

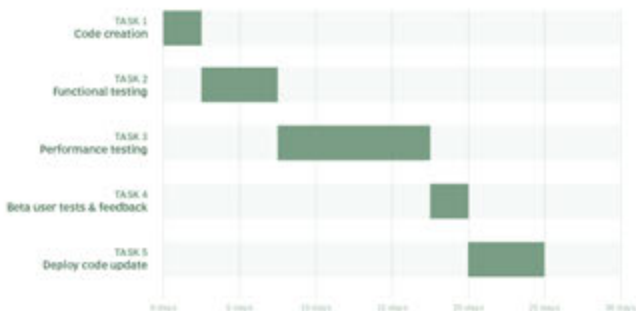
Depending on the structure of an organization, employees may have a functional, "day job" that they will be expected to continue to work on in some capacity while also supporting the project. Coordination and communication with these resources and their leadership are critical. Once the availability of the right resources with the right skill sets is known, they can be formally assigned to the individual project tasks. The project manager will then be able to assign expected start and end dates to each task.

4

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

It's time to put everything into practice and create the schedule! The project manager knows what needs to be done, and when it needs to be done, which are some of the last elements needed before putting everything together.

Gantt chart



“The goal is to turn data into information, and information into insight.”

There are many ways to do this and multiple tools that can be of service including Gantt charts and project management-specific software. No matter what tool you choose, all of the above information must be documented and communicated effectively.

The project manager knowing the project schedule is important, but what's even more important is ensuring anyone involved with the schedule is familiar with (and bought into) it. The project schedule needs to be signed off and approved by all individuals expected to execute it. Many times after the schedule is pulled together, the common operating picture may look very different than individuals expect. This may lead to some potential rework or adjustments, but ensuring everyone is aligned on what's going to happen is imperative.

Depending on the size of the project, it may make sense to create a high-level timeline that demonstrates big blocks of work and highlights key milestones along the way. Being able to communicate the schedule effectively is a crucial part of overall schedule development.

A high-level timeline may also be effective for reporting purposes. Anyone who will be reporting the progress of the project must be familiar with and approve the finalized project schedule.



While serving in the Marine Corps, we had a common saying for any operation: “Plans mean nothing, but planning is everything.” This highlighted the fact that plans will change for any number of reasons; resource constraints, vendor delays, new technical issues, or complications. This doesn’t mean that’s an excuse to not plan!

Developing a project schedule is a critical part of the project planning process. It allows you to define a baseline schedule to work off of and is a key opportunity to identify all stakeholders and complex variables. Developing the project schedule will uncover risks that will need to be managed effectively.

The project schedule will serve as the common operating picture that all stakeholders, regardless of their specialties, will be able to reference at any point of the project to track progress, anticipate work, and course correct as needed. The project schedule is not the only tool in a project manager’s arsenal, but it is certainly one of the more important ones.

Every project is different but following the key principles listed above will ensure a project manager is armed with the knowledge required to tackle the critical time constraint of the project management triangle.



Greencastle Associates Consulting is a 100% veteran-owned and operated implementation consulting firm that tackles critical projects with a unique, military-precision approach. Founded by veterans in 1997, Greencastle provides metric-driven results to businesses looking to maximize growth. We are experts in change management, process improvement and project management. Using Implementation Management as the foundational approach to every project—we help our clients meet and exceed their definition of success. Our team is mission-focused, adaptable, and ready to get stuff done—all while saving you time and driving operational efficiencies.