

## Is your WBS a Foundation for Success or Failure?



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**Summary: A good WBS is not a detailed "To do" list. All that micro-detail provides less control and a schedule that is too detailed to track and keep up to date.**

Too many project managers build a WBS that gives them no foundation for clear assignments, close tracking or scope control. Rather than micromanage, the best practice is to define and hold team members accountable for deliverables.

### **A Good WBS is Not a "To Do" List**

Too many PMs think their work breakdown structure (WBS) should tell everyone everything they need to do. They create a big list by writing down what needs to be done in order, from first to last. This may be fast but it has some adverse consequences.

- The "To Do" list expands each week as people want to add to the list
- The project manager makes vague, unclear assignments to the team
- The team spends hours in status meetings discussing what to do next

### **A Good WBS has Measurable Achievements on Every Line**

To avoid this nasty list, we teach project managers to decompose the project's scope into the WBS. Decomposition takes longer than jotting down a "To Do" list and it requires a lot more thinking. But taking that extra time and doing that thinking gives you a professional-grade WBS. Consistently successful project managers always use decomposition because it saves time during the project and makes for better control.

The decomposition effort results in good scope control and in team members knowing what a good job is before they start work. That is rare in many organizations. But when we have it, the team wastes much less time because people know what is expected of them. Let's see how we build this kind of WBS.

Look at the section of a WBS below. The PM took the scope as defined by the sponsor, which is a deliverable with a measurable success criteria: \$1 million in web sales from a new product. Having the scope and its acceptance criteria defined in objectively

measured form is critical. If we have a mushy scope none of the supporting deliverables can be crisply defined. We have such a scope here and so the PM can begin the decomposition (deconstruction) process working top-down from the scope's measurable success criteria.

XJ-17 Project
Start
\$1 million in XJ-17 sales on website
40% of website visitors return within 30 days
P Burlingame & J Wilson sign off on website graphics & design
Product managers approve 124 XJ-17 product pictures and descriptions
Focus group of ten customers can each find 6 randomly selected XJ-17 product
High level design spec 1-1 & test criteria 1-2 approved by Burlingame & Wilson
Detailed design approved by Burlingame & Wilson as meeting spec 1-1
IT-QC sign off that Construction meets spec 1-1
IT-QC sign off that System test meets test criteria 1-2
IT-QC sign off that Integration testing meets test criteria 1-2
Burlingame & Wilson sign off on acceptance testing against test criteria 1-2
Website attracts 5,000 visitors per day
Website has a top 5 position in the 8 major search engines
20% of existing customers visit website

The PM decomposed that scope into 7 high-level achievements (3 are shown in the screen shot) each of which is also a deliverable with an objectively measured success criteria. How did the PM do it? By asking people to define the step to take us from where we are now to that measured achievement in the scope. This decomposition approach take some time but the best part of the resulting WBS is that every entry is necessary to reach

the project scope.

Any additions to the project will have to pass the same test of being vital for reaching the sales target.

With the major deliverables in place, the PM decomposed them into smaller achievements. Then we further divide those achievements down to the level of individual assignments. This process takes some thinking and you need to master the right techniques but it will yield crystal assignments for the team and tight scope control.

We teach these decomposition techniques in our individual training classes where you learn by applying the tools to realistic projects under the tutelage of an expert project manager.