



The Work Breakdown Structure: Is It Just A Big “To Do” List?

by Dick Billows

For some PMs and the executives/users/clients with whom they work, the work breakdown structure (WBS) is nothing but a big “To Do” list. But as we’ll see, the WBS is the project management equivalent of a Palm reading. It’s a marvelous forecaster of the project manager’s style with the team and stakeholders and an even better predictor of the kind of control that will be exercised over the project. Let’s start with what the WBS tells us about the PM who created it. Then we’ll listen to the PMs talk about how they use their WBS.

Types of PMs and Their Work Breakdown Structures

Some PMs are technical gurus and others have the interpersonal skills of a game show host but for all of them, the WBS says a lot about what they will manage during the project. We’ll examine three PM types, starting with those who create the biggest WBS.

Scheduling clerk – These are the worst of the micro-managers with a truly monstrous WBS that makes a real thump when laid on an executive’s desk. They have hundreds or even thousands of micro-tasks; many with durations of just an hour or less. These PMs believe that they can schedule everything that must be done, including bathroom visits, for everyone on the team. Fittingly, this scheduling clerk also likes to make all the decisions on the project. Team members quickly learn that solving their own problems is a mistake, as is making the slightest adjustment in their lists of micro-tasks. They discover that it is better to line up in front of the PM’s cubicle for guidance than to actually think for themselves. The scheduling clerk manages by looking backwards at what happened last week and, thus, these PMs are routinely stunned when the unexpected happens. In response, they usually change nothing in their detailed schedule, making themselves irrelevant to the project by its third week. Scheduling clerks can do fairly well with small projects and teams of 1 or 2 but anything larger renders this style of PM totally ineffective.

Order takers- These PMs build a slightly smaller WBS while talking relentlessly about being user or client-focused. But instead of listing micro-activities like the scheduling clerk, the order taker’s WBS is a long listing of all the features, requirements and functions that anyone has mentioned. Often the whole project team and the users get into the act, adding all their ideas to the list every week. It’s like the drive-thru window at a fast-food joint. These WBS are also easy to update; whenever new requirements emerge, the order taker simply converts the request into technical mumbo jumbo and adds it to the bottom of the WBS. No one, least

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of all the PM, makes any effort to tie all the pieces together. As you might expect, these projects last forever and the PM smiles as each new request arrives and says, “Can I super-size that requirement for you?”

Accountability-type – These PMs spend much more time on their WBS than any of the others. Yet, their WBS is much smaller, often a tenth the size of the monsters we usually see, and the duration of each of their tasks is longer. What takes so much time and requires so much thinking is that every WBS entry is a measurable, verifiable business outcome. While the other PMs can create their activity list WBS almost without conscious thought, these PMs invest a lot of brain power and hours of time deciding exactly what they want from each assignment and how they will measure the result. It is very hard for these PMs to start work quickly because they spend so much time asking stakeholders pointed questions about business value and the outcome the executives want. Their team members know what result is expected before they start work.

How Did The WBS Get So Big?

When asked why their WBS is so big and filled with such minutia, the two micro-manger types have very simple answers:

“If it’s not in the plan, people won’t do it! They don’t show any initiative or independence!”

“We have standards and documentation requirements which people will forget if I don’t tell them ...over and over and over.”

“How will they know what to do if I don’t tell them in the WBS? They refuse to figure out things themselves.”

There seems to be a bit of a self-fulfilling prophesy between the WBS style and project team member behavior. When we ask the accountability-type why their WBS is so small they say,

“I manage the end results that I am holding people accountable for delivering, not all the steps they will take getting there. That lets me give capable people big, challenging assignments and less capable people smaller assignments. Then I spend my time with the people who need it.”

Next we probe a bit further with the big WBS people and ask, “How did you build a schedule for all those hundreds of assignment and gain your team members’ commitments?”

“Well,” the PMs with the big WBS answer, “We examined each task and developed risk assessments, assumptions and alternative approach scenarios that allowed us to triangulate to an estimate of duration that...”

We cut off the PM’s babbling and ask, “You backed into each assignment’s due date from the completion date the sponsor gave you, didn’t you? Then you told everyone



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what their date had to be, right?”

The big WBS PM hung his head and then said, “Well we have really great status meetings and everyone really participates in working things out.”

We ask the accountability-type PM with the small WBS the same questions and hear,

“Because my WBS is small I can craft each assignment precisely. Then I can negotiate not only the work and duration with the team member but all the work package details like risk factors, input and output deliverables. That lets me start mitigating risks early instead of waiting until they bite me. It takes time but once we start work, very little remains to be worked out.”

The big WBS PMs snort and say, “Well the executives really like our brawny WBS. We give them something to sink their teeth into!”

But My Big WBS Impresses The People In Pin-Stripes

It certainly is true that the PMs who churn out massive WBS are, in some organizations, praised by decision-makers smitten with To Do list thinking about projects. Often these executives have never seen anything else. They think that endless minutia in the WBS leads to tight control and successful projects. Let’s ask the PMs about a hypothetical project problem. “Say the sponsor calls and asks what it would take to finish three weeks earlier than planned. How would you handle it?”

The Big WBS PMs shuffle around and then say, “Well, it is hard to keep the plan updated and a lot of the team members forget to give us status reports on all their tasks...I mean we all have lots of things to do besides data entry. And, changing the WBS to reflect what happened takes a lot of time. So it will take some time to develop an answer and we will have to get everyone together to figure out where we really are and what it will take.”

The accountability PM says, “Updating the plan takes 10-15 minutes a week. Sure, team members forget to turn in status reports but because my assignments are a little bigger, most of them only have one in-progress task to report on. As a result, I always have data on the project that is 4 days old at the latest and I can give an answer in a few minutes.”

We ask one more question of the PMs, “How does the sponsor check on progress and control the project?”

The big WBS people answer, “The sponsor comes to status meetings and we all work to unearth where we are and where we are going. It takes a lot of time and the executive has to dig into the detail but that’s a good use of their time.”

The accountability-type PM says, “Because my plan is a hierarchy of



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measured business outcomes, executives can track progress easily. Each of my achievements has an unambiguous business result, a budget and a duration so the executive can easily focus on problems and opportunities.”

The Right Seed For A Good WBS

However, there is one wonderful benefit of the focus on To Do list project management and its massive WBS. With all the mind numbing detail, they hide the fact that no one from the sponsor down to PM has any idea what specific business value the project is supposed to produce. Now when asked about the project, any of those characters can spout words like:

“This project is about giving our customers world-class customer service. There’ll be new systems and new processes to support them. The users and IT staff are partners and together we’ll streamline the work flow, train everyone and really use the power of automation to delight the customer and provide world class service!”

Which really means,

“I don’t have the faintest idea what we are supposed to deliver or how the result will be verified. All I know are some of the features that some of the people want and I’m hoping to have a new job before this project ends.”

Some of these PMs even think that getting executive approval of their massive WBS will provide them protection when the executives realize that the project produced nothing of value. That is a pipe dream of truly startling proportions that has had serious career implications for many PMs.

A good WBS springs from one source and only one source and that is an understanding of the business value the sponsor wants to buy. A good WBS doesn’t come from a listing of requirements that produces only more and more requirements. So to develop an effective WBS the savvy PM persists until he or she has unearthed the measured business outcome the client or user wants. Then the PM breaks it down into smaller and smaller objectively measured results. On projects bigger than planting your herb garden, you manage people’s achievements, their end results; not all the little activities they must perform. You must also decide how much problem-solving to delegate to them. Only on “plant your own herb garden” size projects can the PM solve all the problems. Your most capable people should have big achievements with lots of problem-solving responsibility. Your new people and those in need of development should get smaller achievements and less problem solving. But if all your assignments are tiny, the whole project team will perform at less than their potential.”

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Summary

There are thinking, planning and interpersonal skills required to make your WBS more than a To Do list. To learn those skills and actually practice them in realistic e-simulations, visit our site www.4pm.com. You'll learn an achievement-based approach for your WBS. You can study via our distance learning courses. To integrate this approach into your organizational PM methodology, visit our Enterprise Project Management section. Additional information is also available in our Project Repository and the Articles section of our website.

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