

## Drowning in the Project Resource Pool:



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Managing the pool of people who work on projects rather than pretending they can manage all their conflicting project assignments themselves.

Organizations have people working on an awful lot of projects these days. Some projects stay within one department while others span the organization, pulling people from many different functional units and from outside the organization. Let's dive into these shark-infested waters where all this project work gets done.

### It's like the Bermuda Triangle in Here

In most organizations, the resource pool is a cauldron of treacherous currents, whirlpools and tidal waves that frequently drown the swimmers. Sure there are lifeguards, we call them project managers, who walk the poolside, shouting, blowing their whistles and occasionally diving in to perform heroic rescues of team members who go under. The swimmers cling to each other, in project teams, trying to keep together and paddle to the finish line. But many of the swimmers are part of more than one group. The "Y2K Project" is pulling on a member's left leg, while the other leg is in the grip of the "World-class Customer Service Project." Some swimmers are yanked by so many projects that new projects have to grab whatever appendage they can. It's no wonder the teams can't swim briskly to the finish line. The lifeguards whistle, shout and even tell "in demand" resources to go underwater and blow bubbles to avoid losing them to another project. Instead of shouting, the better lifeguards use sound PM techniques to throw teams floats of various sizes so fewer of those team members get pulled under.

On the sundeck, project executives shout, "We have to be done by June 30<sup>th</sup>." But when a team makes it to the finish line and displays their project result, the executives are usually disappointed and asked the project team to start over, with a new acronym. Every now and then the executives launch a new "#1 Priority" project into the pool like a "cannon-ball" off the diving board. Occasionally an executive, frustrated by the lack of results, grabs a whistle and becomes a lifeguard. However, there is so much chaos in the resource pool that it's often difficult for them to decide if they have problems, much less



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how to solve them. Whenever an executive asks a team of swimmers how things are going, they pause their furious dog paddling, give the "thumbs up" signal and shout, "We're in green light status." This tells an executive absolutely nothing about whether the project is producing business value.

## Yes, there is a Shallow End in the Resource Pool

In the shallow end of the resource pool, team members don't need to paddle quite so hard to keep afloat and make it to the finish line. They work on projects within their "home" units. If the lifeguard's PM techniques supply water-wings, the team can "touch bottom" on the department's priority, workload management and authority process and the lifeguards can get their teams to the finish line. Unfortunately, projects done in the shallow end of the pool rarely produced significant business value for the organization.

When organizations need cross-functional results, the swimmers have to venture into the middle of the pool where the currents tear apart the water-wing PM techniques. If the organization does not extend the priority, allocation and authority foundation, the water gets deep and the currents stronger. No longer will the lifeguard's water-wing techniques let the team stand on a department's foundation. These furiously paddling swimmers have "real jobs" and several project assignments pulling on them. The results these projects promise are more significant to the business but are produced infrequently unless the lifeguard has more substantial PM techniques that give each team member a life-preserver. But even the best life-preservers don't guarantee success or prevent drowning. Failures are so frequent, even for the best-equipped lifeguards, that we see cross-functional projects split into smaller functional pieces. The members swim back to the shallow end where less potent PM techniques work. That makes the swimming easier but usually eliminates any chance of producing significant results for the business.

In the deep end of the pool, we see the organization's mega-projects, efforts critical to the organization's success. The life-preserver PM techniques that worked in the middle of the pool do nothing but decorate watery graves when we try to use them in the deep end. The organization's failure to build cross-functional prioritization, allocation and authority processes makes the deep end a maelstrom of rushing white water and whirlpools ready to suck an entire team under. These projects receive a great deal of encouragement from the executives on the sun deck, who often give the project manager a very loud whistle. But neither encouragement nor the loud whistle can calm the rushing waters. The lifeguard launches a dinghy to keep the team above water but that floatation is consumed keeping the team afloat rather than speeding them to the finish line. The lifeguards and their swimmers face this maelstrom because the user or client organization:

- ❑ Can't make cross functional authority work
- ❑ Doesn't specify the priority of this deep-end project versus their other projects and
- ❑ Can't manage or allocate people's total workload.

## What Happened to our Kiddy Pool?

How did the resource pool become rushing white-water? Organizations start off doing projects in the shallow end where everybody can stand on the "bottom" provided by the management hierarchies' authority, prioritization and resource allocation. Project managers can use "water-wing" techniques and achieve good results. Then the organization began to use projects as a vehicle for solving problems and taking advantage of opportunities across functional lines. All of a sudden, the swimmers couldn't touch bottom because the organization didn't give projects in the middle of the pool anything to stand on. Life-preserver PM techniques, if these skills were added, helped though they could not totally calm the waters. The situation got even worse when we ventured into the deep end, trying to deliver strategically significant project results and drawing on teams that span the organization. Once again, more sophisticated user/client PM techniques helped but were not sufficient. There may have been much talk about how, "We're a matrix organization," but no amount of talk calms the resource pool.

Oftentimes the problem is seen as a lack of decision-making information. And, it is true that executives cannot:

- ❑ Set a strategic course for their projects
- ❑ Aim projects at business-relevant outcomes
- ❑ Trade-off a project's business results, duration, cost and odds of success
- ❑ Set priorities that delay some projects and favor those in the deep end
- ❑ Measure a project's in-process business value
- ❑ Adjust resource allocation to maximize their project portfolio "yield."

The lack of decision-making information also affects all the project management lifeguards who cannot:

- ❑ Objectively measure the progress of individual assignments
- ❑ Identify problems before it's too late to take corrective action
- ❑ Base project commitments on known availability of their swimmers.

This combination yields resource pool chaos and people on projects who:

- ❑ Must guess at the work priorities
- ❑ Cope with a workload that prevents good work on any of their assignments
- ❑ Receive "to do" assignments with vague end results that change every week.

Many of these problems come from a lack of decision-making information. To bring order to the resource pool, organizations often install new project information systems. This is an easy solution but usually improves nothing because the underlying business processes are unsound.

## We Need a Big Wading Pool

To bring order to the resource pool, we need to undertake the much more difficult step of implementing consistent project management processes without burying our people in even more work. We need to give all projects and their swimmers the ability to "stand on the bottom" even when the project involves significant cross-functional or cross-organizational resources. Then more sophisticated PM techniques add to project business value instead of being consumed by survival.

We need processes where we set project priorities. This does not mean calling everything a number one priority. What setting priorities means is that some projects have to wait for resources until the people they need finish assignments on higher priority projects. To prioritize, executives need uniform project planning processes and methodologies that yield concise and consistent measures of the business value each project will deliver and the resources required. The first step in setting priorities is that no project gets resources until the executive has accepted the project's business value and assigned it a priority in his or her portfolio. This also means that when a new "number one" priority project comes along, we have to bump some other project and reduce its priority for resources. Setting priorities has to happen regularly at the upper levels of the organization. There will be conflict over priorities and we need to have this conflict resolved by decision-makers so that the people in the resource pool clearly understand what comes first.

We need processes that allow us to allocate resources by managing everyone's workload. This does not mean we say, "This project's really important, find a way to get it done." This technique may work a few times but after months of this sort of resource management, we have a lot of swimmers who drown. What managing resources means is that every project has a plan that specifies what people and how much of their time the project needs. Even the projects in the shallow end of the pool have to be in the allocation because they consume, in aggregate, a tremendous proportion of the organization's swimmer's time. We must implement a consistent project management methodology for every project that's flexible enough so that smaller efforts don't have to apply the entire PMBOK™ (Project Management Body of Knowledge) to meet the standard. This combination will allow executives to manage the resource supply and demand while facilitating compliance across all projects. Managing resource allocation also creates conflict. When somebody wants Pat for their project, we don't just blindly agree. Instead we look at Pat's workload and identify available blocks of time. If that availability is not satisfactory, then some other project has to be bumped. We make these decisions for the swimmers in the resource pool rather than leave it to them to try and figure out how to squeeze everything in.

We need cross-functional authority processes. This does not mean that we tell project managers, "You have my full support." It means our processes give project managers in the cross-functional "deep end" authority to assign work, evaluate and reward performance, almost like they were operating in the shallow end of the pool. Line managers have to give up some of their authority over "loaned" resources. For this process to work we may need changes to the performance evaluation and reward

processes. It may also mean that we need project budgets that allow projects to "buy" the resources they need from departments.

Implementing these process changes is exceedingly difficult. Usually organizations won't make these process changes until the pain of project failure is so severe that they'll take on the daunting task of lowering "functional silos" and adjusting hierarchical authority to create the foundation for cross functional projects.

To read more about these organizational process changes, visit our [Enterprise Project Management](#) section. To learn about the different levels of project management techniques appropriate in different parts of the resource pool, visit our [Project Repository](#) or review our [project textbooks](#) and descriptions of our [in-person and "over the Web" courses](#).