

The Death Spiral of an IT Department: Taking the Turtle Approach to Projects



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: More and more IT departments see declining approval ratings from the user departments they serve. The users want improvements in their operating efficiency and effectiveness that the IT department is not delivering. **Why?** Because these IT departments define project success as delivering software, rather than delivering performance improvement in the user organization.

But They Signed Off on the Specifications

It all begins innocently. User departments are under increased pressure to improve efficiency, increase customer satisfaction and reduce costs. Despite these pressures on their users, the IT department operates as if delivering technical specifications was sufficient. Instead of learning the users' business and planning projects targeted on improved operating results, they pull their heads in like turtles and try to hide behind technical specifications.

In fairness, users are often resistant to the IT department becoming involved in "their business." Historically the IT department may have performed as a gaggle of technical geeks rather than as business problem solvers. Both those issues can be barriers to the IT department suddenly wanting to work hand-in-glove with the user.

Whatever the history, IT projects fall short of expectations with greater and greater frequency. User dissatisfaction skyrockets when IT projects fail to deliver operational improvements. The users won't accept the excuse that the IT department delivered the technical specs on which the users signed-off at the beginning...users want operating results.

In the face of these criticisms, the IT department retreats even further, trying to hide behind technical lingo and specifications. They don't broaden the scope of IT projects and aim at operational improvements, instead they just produce software. This attitude starts the death spiral.

We'll Hire Our Own IT Department

The users' response to these failures in the IT department is to hire business analysts and IT staff who work for the user department and whose sole job is to convey the user management's wishes to the IT staff. Sadly, CIO's often welcome this move as a

way to reduce conflict. IT project managers see it freeing them from the burden of understanding the users' business and the operational improvements the user wants. Now their new customer is the users' IT staff.

Unfortunately, the addition of the staff positions rarely improves the quality of the user department's information systems. They still don't plan projects that embrace all the components needed for operational improvements: software development, hardware acquisition, user process changes and training the user personnel. They leave these critical success elements out of the project plan or believe they are separate efforts, which may or may not be integrated or even completed. Scope control deteriorates and the requirements list continues to grow until well after the planned completion date.

Let's Save Time, Forget Documentation and Controls

The next step in this downward spiral is that the IT department reorganizes itself so there's a project team for each user department. A project manager, and soon afterwards programmers and analysts, are dedicated to one user department. The argument for this is that the user no longer has to fight for programmer and analyst resources to meet their department's needs.

At this point, the IT department gradually loses control over the quality of the software and the internal controls over the operational applications. User-controlled IT staff often make changes to operational systems on the fly. They fast-track projects by skipping software quality control and documentation requirements.

The dedicated project manager and technical staff might as well be employees of the user department because it is there that they look for all direction. The Chief Information Officer is increasingly powerless to set priorities or shift personnel based on the relative benefit of development projects because each user department jealously guards its IT resources.

Despite all these changes, the user departments are still not getting the operational improvements they wanted from information systems. All they've done is cripple the IT department and set up situations where buying IT services outside the organization may be the only way to recover.

What Started the Death Spiral?

It's easy to talk about IT project management as being user-centric and about how "the user is our customer and we want to delight them." However, that talk gets IT departments nowhere. Any IT department that conceives its role and its projects to deliver a set of technical specifications rather than business value is ripe to plunge into the death trap.

Avoiding the Death Spiral

The solution is to plan projects top down, not from technical requirements and specifications, but from the operational improvements the user wants. We focus on this type of project approach in our [Achievement-driven Project Methodology \(AdPM™\)](#). In it, we define success in the user's business and through the user's eyes and drive projects to that result. Using AdPM™, project managers work with user management to identify the operational metrics they want to improve and that becomes the project scope.

Then working top down, they decompose the scope into a series of high-level measured achievements. In other words, we are not starting with the technical specifications of the system. Instead, we are decomposing the operational performance achievements into major deliverables. This decomposition includes software development and hardware acquisition but also includes process improvements in the user organization and training of user personnel. An integrated project plan with all of these components has significantly higher odds of delivering operating improvements. Everyone working on the project, from user employees to IT staff, has a focus on the same operational results. They are not just optimizing the work within their own narrow worlds.

To learn more about our [Achievement-driven Project Methodology \(AdPM™\)](#) visit our web site and consider our [IT project management courses](#) as well as our [customized in-person training](#) for groups. We'll teach you how to plan and execute projects that deliver operational improvements for the user.