



INSTRUCTOR-LED DISTANCE LEARNING

Prep for PMI Exam
Prep for CompTIA Exam
Engineering/Construction PM
Healthcare PM Cert
Senior PM Cert
In-Person Seminars

PROJECT BOOKS

ENTERPRISE PM

4PM.com

“Aiming at the last achievement, not just the first, markedly improves the odds of accomplishing both”



The Work Breakdown Structure Is Not A Tube Of Toothpaste

Some people think the work breakdown structure (WBS) is just a fancy name for a To Do list. They also believe bigger is better in a WBS and that a really good WBS can be used for project after project. They think that successful project management is no more than having the right WBS template and then squeezing work out of it like paste from a toothpaste tube. These people also believe that it is Santa Claus, not the Easter Bunny, who decides if projects finish on time.

Designing a solid WBS is a bit more complicated than just listing every task you can think of. In fact, our design of the WBS impacts the duration of our project, the morale of our team and our credibility with executive decision makers. Before we get into all that, let's dispel a few myths.

I Have To List Everything or They'll Forget To Do It

The WBS has several purposes, as we will discuss. But those purposes do not include listing every little nit-picky thing that everyone has to do on the project. If that were true then a good WBS would list tasks like:

- 7.1.5.8.2 Final report completion and cleanup**
- 7.1.5.8.2.1 Staple pages of your document in the upper left-hand corner with two staples
- 7.1.5.8.2.2 Return stapler to drawer
- 7.1.5.8.2.3 Throw scrap paper and other waste into trash can
- 7.1.5.8.2.4 Check that you did not miss the trash can
- 7.1.5.8.2.5 Sharpen your pencils in preparation for the next task

All PMs occasionally have paranoid worries that their team will, “forget to do something, if I don't list it in the WBS,” and about how “I have to remember everything for them.” When this paranoia strikes, ask yourself if a WBS at that level of detail really will prevent people from skipping a step. Remember that trying to write a WBS that covers everything is impossible. In the above example, I forgot to mention taking the stapler out of the drawer. In fact, all that detail in a WBS is self-defeating because it convinces your team that they are responsible for nothing but what's on the WBS. It gives them a “If it's not listed don't do it” attitude.

Everyone Loved My 56-Page WBS

Some executives encourage the wrong kind of thinking on the WBS. They praise the PM who produces a 36-page monster, failing to mention that they never looked at it. It may appear that this PM genius who produced the Godzilla WBS has thought of everything, but what happens to it once the project starts?

First, the WBS is so big that the PM must take a lot of time to find out the status



INSTRUCTOR-LED DISTANCE LEARNING

Prep for PMI Exam
Prep for CompTIA Exam
Engineering/Construction PM
Healthcare PM Cert
Senior PM Cert
In-Person Seminars

PROJECT BOOKS

ENTERPRISE PM

4PM.com

“Aiming at the last achievement, not just the first, markedly improves the odds of accomplishing both”



of each item and then it takes even longer to update the plan because there are lots of changes at this level of detail. So by the third week of the project the PM has abandoned the WBS and Gantt chart because they take too much time to keep current. Instead these PMs often try to compensate for the absence of a plan with an “Issues List” which grows so rapidly that it soon rivals the Godzilla WBS in size. Creating these twin monsters, the WBS and Issues List, is equivalent to wearing a sign around your neck that says, “I didn’t do any thinking about this project before we started work.”

With those myths behind us, let’s consider how we design a strong WBS.

Hunks In The WBS Come In Several Sizes

Instead of thinking of the WBS as a big To Do list, we need to think of it as a subdivision of the project’s overall business achievement into the hunks of smaller achievements we will manage. This approach gives us an efficient project management tool since it produces a WBS that is of a manageable size; usually a tenth the size of a To Do list WBS. The key WBS design questions are: How do we describe these hunks? How big should the hunks be? And how many should I have?

First, there are two ways to describe an assignment. We can list everything we want the person to do or we can specify the end result we want. Specifying the end result is always better and it’s the heart of our Achievement-driven Project Management methodology (AdPM)[™]. With this approach, we describe the hunk in terms of how we will evaluate what the team member delivers at the end; how we’ll measure their achievement.

Then, how big should the hunks be? The answer is that it depends. For a very capable person who is a solid performer, the right-sized achievement hunk might be several weeks’ worth of work. For a trainee, the right-sized hunk might be one or two day’s worth of work. So we would subdivide the trainee’s assignment into several smaller pieces while the experienced pro gets one big one. However, we assign each of these people an end result and tell them how we’ll measure their success. By assigning people the right-sized hunks we set the stage for motivating rather than micromanaging our team.

How do we get these measured achievement hunks, you may be asking? Well we get them by subdividing larger hunks until we get to the right sized hunks for a particular team member. Let’s look at the steps in planning a project from the top down with measured achievements.

Executives Want To Look At Big Hunks of the Project

With our Achievement-driven Project Management Methodology (AdPM)[™] we develop the WBS by subdividing the project into smaller and smaller achievements,



INSTRUCTOR-LED DISTANCE LEARNING

Prep for PMI Exam
Prep for CompTIA Exam
Engineering/Construction PM
Healthcare PM Cert
Senior PM Cert
In-Person Seminars

PROJECT BOOKS ENTERPRISE PM

4PM.com

“Aiming at the last achievement, not just the first, markedly improves the odds of accomplishing both”



starting with the projects MOS™ or its Measure of Success. That's the business value that the project sponsor or client wants to “buy” from the project. We unearthed it during our strategic project planning. We start with that overall business outcome and subdivide that into what we call High-level Achievements (HLA)™ which are the major business achievements we need to deliver. Those HLA™ are usually too big to assign to a team member but they are just the right size for executives to use in tracking the project.

Hard as it may be for micromanagers to believe, few executives are interested in tracking projects using 369 techno-babble checkpoints. What they want is a few unambiguous and verifiable business outcomes that mark major stages. They'd like it even better if each of the executive hunks of the project also had a budget and a duration of its own. So our WBS design will establish how both executives and the PM will manage the project. If we give the executives efficient and unambiguous tools for tracking the project it helps our credibility with them.

A Project Is Not A Tube Of Toothpaste

So a To Do list WBS can undermine the morale of the project team, leave the PM with no plan with which to manage events and deny executives efficient control points for tracking progress. But that's nothing compared to the damage To Do list thinking does to the duration of a project.

When PMs develop a WBS by listing everything everybody should do, it's very natural for them to think sequentially, “Pete will write the specs, then Dana will get the signoff, then Alice will be doing the...”

These PMs develop the whole WBS that way and then work through the rest of the scheduling process. They are managing the assignments as if they were paste in a toothpaste tube that they can squeeze out in the same sequence in which they wrote them in the WBS.

These plans have little parallelism or concurrency; that is, the plans tend to have long sequences of tasks with only a few things happening in the project at the same time. The technical term we use is a choo-choo train project which has a longer duration than it should because the PM missed opportunities to schedule in parallel. That sequential thinking is hard to undo once the WBS is complete.

When we use a top down development process for the WBS, as in our AdPM™ approach we build parallelism into the plan from the beginning. Each of those high-level achievements we discussed earlier usually becomes a separate branch in our achievement network and we can schedule lots of things to happen at the same time and thus shorten the project duration.

PMTalk NewsLetter

The Project Management Control Tower <http://www.4pm.com>



INSTRUCTOR-LED DISTANCE LEARNING

Prep for PMI Exam
Prep for CompTIA Exam
Engineering/Construction PM
Healthcare PM Cert
Senior PM Cert
In-Person Seminars

PROJECT BOOKS

ENTERPRISE PM

4PM.com

*“Aiming at the last
achievement , not just the
first, markedly improves
the odds of
accomplishing both”*



Summary

Designing a WBS as opposed to just mindlessly listing tasks can yield important benefits in terms of team morale, shorter project durations and executive control. To learn more about our Achievement-driven Project Management (AdPM)TM techniques, please visit our Project Management bookstore, consider our instructor-lead distance learning course or our in-person seminars for your organization.

©2002 The Hampton Group Inc. All Rights Reserved

3547 South Ivanhoe Street, Denver, Colorado, USA 80237-1122 inquiry@4pm.com,
Voice 303.756.4247, FAX 303.756.0603

MOS[™] and HLA[™] are trademarks of The Hampton Group, Inc. Microsoft Project is a registered trademark of the Microsoft Corporation.
PMBOK is a registered trademark of the Project Management Institute, Inc.