

Work Breakdown Structure: Deliverables or a "To Do" List



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Summary: The work breakdown structure provides the platform on which a PM controls the project team and the check points against which the PM measures progress. When we build a "To Do list" WBS, we lose both those tools and must micromanage to control the effort.

It's amazing how often people ask: "How many tasks should this project have?" or, "How much detail should I have in the project WBS?"

The usual mistake PMs make is to list "to do's," often hundreds or thousands of them. They start by listing the first thing they can think of to do and stop when they can't think of anything else that must be done. They may craft tasks that will take as little as an hour to complete. The driving force behind all this minutia is that they don't want anybody to forget anything.

It's easy to get caught up in the idea that a project's WBS should detail everything everyone should do on the project. That, so the thinking goes, will protect us from people forgetting or skipping an item because they are lazy, stupid or sloppy. It also frees us from having to rely on the thinking or creativity of the team members. They can just put their heads down and follow the "to do" list. The PM has "thought of everything" and done all the thinking for them.

This "to do" list approach may work for projects with 1 or two people, but it falls apart when the effort gets any bigger. The flaws come from a misunderstanding of:

- ⑩ how to exercise tight control on a project
- ⑩ pros and cons of micromanagement
- ⑩ How to spot and solve problems early.

What is Tight Control of a Project?

Is tight control having no problems? Hardly. That happens only in project fantasyland. Tight control requires that we meet the following two conditions. First, we have tight

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control when we can identify problems early and fix them cheaply rather than discovering them when they are too big or and very expensive or when it's too late to fix them. Second, we have tight control when every project team member knows what they are accountable for delivering. The acceptance criteria for a team member's deliverable is quite different from what they have to do. As an example, a "to do" list might tell a team member to "clean up the file room." But a better WBS would define their deliverable as an acceptance criteria like "98% of the files are on the shelves in alphabetical order." When we assign th deliverable we have much better control because the team member knows what is "good enough" and doesn't have to guess. When we can't exercise tight, control all that's left is checking everyone's work very frequently and trying to make all the decisions: that's micromanagement.

Pros & Cons of Micromanagement

Micromanagement is appropriate for brand new employees who need to learn their jobs and for known slackers or nincompoops on the team. But few project teams are composed entirely of people who need all the decisions made for them. This management style discourages problem solving or ownership of results. It makes team members dependent on the project manager rather than allowing them to be independent decision makers. Worst of all it creates team members who have no accountability for their results; all they have to do is follow the "to do" list of activities.

The majority of your project team members will not thrive under micromanagement. Those who want independence and are willing to be accountable for their work are stifled by micromanagement. They are the best performers and we want to get their best work.

Micromanagement does not work on projects that require complex judgments and creative thinking. On these projects, much of the work is cerebral and it is impossible to specify everything that must be done. More importantly it is stupid to try and specify it. Say we have an experienced engineer performing a task like "design the payment input screen (GUI) for the billing system." That relatively small task will require:

- ⑩ meetings to gather information about requirements from users
- ⑩ listing all the required information for the GUI
- ⑩ thinking about how to arrange the data elements on the screen for data entry efficiency

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- ⑩ writing a layout document for the screen
- ⑩ meeting with users to get approval of the rough design.

We could list all those activities and more in the WBS but what if the engineer comes up with a great idea? Do we want the engineer to ignore it and follow the WBS? No, we want the engineer to figure out the best way to do the design.

So instead of the activities in the "to do" list above, we might assign deliverables such as:

- ⑩ User management signs off on the GUI design and acceptance criteria
- ⑩ User management signs off that the GUI meets the acceptance criteria.

We let the engineer estimate how long those two deliverables will take. We'll get a status report each week so we know how the work is progressing and have an assignment that may very well motivate the engineer.

Maintaining the "To Do" List WBS

Remember how small the second WBS was for the engineer compared to the first. That is typical. The "to do" list approach to the work breakdown yields very large and very detailed work breakdowns which require lots of maintenance. Every time one of the micro-tasks changes we need to update the WBS. That can require dozens and dozens of changes each week by the PM. Also the team members are each reporting on 5-15 tasks per week. The PM, with or without clerical support, has a great deal of data entry to do to input all this status data.

The inevitable result is that tracking falls behind and so does updating the schedule. There are simply not enough hours to complete these tasks. Usually within a few weeks the PM stops updating the schedule because it takes too much time. This may sound like a stupid and improbable reaction, but we see it with alarming frequency, even on large and important projects. The logic is, "No one is looking at all that detail anyway, so why spend all that time to catch up?"

A Deliverables WBS Works Best

Professionals who manage projects for a living and use the best practices in project management all specify that the WBS should be composed of deliverables, not "to do's." Assigning accountabilities for end results gives us a smaller WBS, easier

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reporting of actuals and many fewer changes to keep the schedule current. We also get more ownership of the results from the team when they have deliverables to produce.

Summary

Your work breakdown structure (WBS) is your design for making assignments, holding people accountable and monitoring process. Done properly, your schedule will be easy to maintain and your people will be responsible for their deliverables.

Learn to do a WBS properly as part of our [basic](#) and [advanced project management courses](#). You'll learn how to break down the scope into deliverables for which you will hold people accountable.

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