

Five Essential Project Management Skills for RM and IG Professionals

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The just-released results of the Forrester Research/ARMA International RM Survey conducted during the second quarter of 2015 show the Project Management Professional (PMP) certification is considered one of the most valuable credentials for records and information professionals to earn. Whether you're pursuing the PMP or not, this article identifies and tells you how you can develop and use several project management skills that will help you be more successful in your career.

The success of an organization's information governance (IG) program depends on the contributions and collaboration of people in many functional areas, including records management (RM), legal, compliance, information technology (IT), and information security. As the conductor who often will lead this orchestra of cross-functional staff, an IG professional must have many skills to ensure that the members play in tune, rather than create a cacophony.

Having project management (PM) skills is one key for leading the orchestra to deliver a great performance in implementing complex IG initiatives. This is because whether they are building an IG program, developing a retention schedule, implementing a legal hold process, or developing strategies for defensible disposition, IG professionals are probably running multiple projects, or initiatives, concurrently.

Among the PM discipline's knowledge areas that can directly benefit IG professionals in their daily work are these five:

1. Gathering business requirements and defining scope
2. Building and managing a project plan
3. Managing stakeholders and communications
4. Managing timelines, risks, and issues
5. Managing change

This article examines each to show how they can help IG professionals drive IG initiatives to successful completion.

Gathering Business Requirements, Defining Scope

Gathering business requirements is the first activity to undertake once an IG initiative is approved, although it might sometimes be necessary even before approval. Without well-defined requirements, the IG professional cannot plan the project, the IT team will

not know what to build, customers will not know what to expect, and there will be no way to validate that the end result will satisfy all stakeholders' needs. In fact, one of the most common reasons projects fail is because business requirements were not defined or were poorly defined.

The business requirements lay the foundation for:

1. Defining scope
2. Testing deliverables
3. Measuring success

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Defining Scope

Business requirements define the scope of a project and enable everyone involved to agree on what will be delivered and what the end result will be. Requirements always need to be documented clearly, in great detail, and in understandable and unambiguous language to allow better estimates of the timeline, budget, and resources, and to provide a method for controlling requirements changes.

An essential part of defining the scope of an IG initiative is identifying deliverables that are out of scope. Thus, if the project, for example, is about implementing an enterprise content management system, but the web content management module is not part of the initial implementation, it needs to be clearly stated in the scope statement. All stakeholders should formally accept the scope statement before the project progresses.

Testing Deliverables

Business requirements are also used to build a test plan, with each requirement becoming a testable item. If IG professionals do not reconcile re-

quirements against deliverables, they most likely will end up with a system or a process that is useless. The consequences of that will be severe, resulting in wasted company resources, lost time, unmitigated risks, and missed opportunities, to name a few.

Not every IG initiative will have a formal testing phase, but there will always be some form of validation. In either case, it is important to test or validate as early as possible in the project's life cycle in order to identify

gaps in requirements and take corrective actions without impacting the timeline, cost, and scope.

Measuring Success

The dependency among timeline, cost, and scope is one of the most fundamental PM concepts. Called the "triple constraint," it is a way to monitor the project and measure its success.

Project success and failure also depend on how the project is perceived. If the wrong business requirements were addressed and the project was set up to deliver the "wrong thing," it may be considered a failure even if everything is delivered on time and within budget and scope.

Gathering the appropriate business requirements ensures that the project delivers business value, leads to happy customers, and increases the adoption rate for the IG program – which is what IG is all about.

Building and Managing a Project Plan

The project plan is one of the most important tools in managing the IG

initiative. Created during the planning phase and constantly updated, the project plan contains the tasks needed to accomplish the scope of the IG initiative, the time allotted to complete the tasks, and the resources required to perform the tasks. The project plan content and format will vary based on the type and complexity of the IG initiative.

Before a project plan can be created it is important to gather the prerequisites; business requirements and scope statement are vital inputs because they enable the creation of tasks.

Identifying Tasks, Resources

In order to derive tasks from the business requirements, IG professionals will need help from those who will do the work. First, learn what the roles and responsibilities of the initiative's stakeholders are. Next, obtain resources and commitments, including black-out periods, such as holidays, vacations, conflicting project timelines, and other events that may divert resources from working on the IG initiative.

After defining tasks, identify the dependencies between the tasks because these drive the project timeline. The more tasks that can be scheduled in parallel, the faster the project will be completed.

Creating a Timeline

Create a preliminary timeline when building a project plan; this can be as simple as a breakdown of project phases. The most common phases are planning, designing, building, testing, implementation, and post-implementation support; however, not every initiative will have all of these phases. Give each phase a high-level estimate of completion in months or weeks.

It is ideal when the timeline can be based on the project scope and available resources, but this may not be possible, such as when the project

end date is imposed by senior management.

There also can be a hard date for implementation, such as the contract expiration date for software, which will drive the implementation date for a new solution. In that case, project planning starts from the end date and the project phases are planned in reverse order.

Sometimes tasks must be rescheduled to run in parallel until they fit within the fixed timeframe. Or, it may be concluded that the timeline is too aggressive and cannot be met. Beware of unrealistic deadlines: working un-

sponsor(s), project team members, vendors, and others. Key stakeholders are identified in the project planning phase, and their needs and expectations are analyzed and converted into business requirements. It is important to document communication needs for each stakeholder group, including communication format, content and level of detail, method, frequency, escalation, and feedback process.

Following Up

Just because tasks were assigned to resources weeks or months ago does not mean they will remember what

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der constant and excessive timeline pressure will lead to project failure.

Finally, it is important to build some contingency into the baseline project plan before it gets published. Things do not always go as planned, and buffers need to be added to critical tasks to allow for the unknowns.

Responding to Changes

Completing a project plan is a big accomplishment, but the job does not end there. Be prepared to constantly adjust the plan because of changes and issues that arise. To be a valuable tool in managing the IG initiative, the project plan needs to be current and responsive to changes.

Managing Stakeholders and Communications

Stakeholders are people or organizations that are positively or negatively affected by the IG initiative; they may include customers, project

they were asked to do and when they were supposed to do it. Following up is one of the most critical communication skills IG professionals should have. It is both a science and an art.

Following up is a science because there needs to be a system for keeping track of task status (e.g., checking in at mid-point in task duration and two days before it is due). Insufficient follow up will result in issues not being surfaced and addressed early. It is an art because it takes interpersonal and organizational skills to bring stakeholders together and make things happen. Following up enables the project manager to perform his or her most important duties, which are to communicate, coordinate, and motivate the project team.

Escalating Issues

Escalating issues to management is another important element of communications. It is always advisable

to privately inform the manager in charge of the area with issues about the plans to escalate first. It is never a good idea to surprise the manager with the “bad news” in front of a wider audience that might include his or her superiors. When done properly, escalations will help the IG professional by engaging the management team to do its jobs, which are to make tough decisions, remove roadblocks, and provide organizational resources.

Reporting Project Status

Truthful project status reporting is a key to successful communications. Beware of *green shifting*, or reporting project status positively when there are obvious indications of serious problems. For example, it is better to report that the e-mail retention implementation initiative is trending from green to yellow status because of anticipated business resource availability issues than it is not to say anything and suddenly report red status later.

If IG professionals choose to do the latter, not only could they be questioned as to why they did not see this issue arising, they also could lose an opportunity to either set the right expectations or get management’s support to mitigate the situation, preventing the red status.

Continuing Lessons Learned

It is recommended to formally conduct lessons learned sessions after each project phase in order to realize process improvements while the project is still ongoing.

Finally, it is important to talk to stakeholders informally and be open to feedback any time during the life of the IG initiative, as that is the only way to know what is really going on.

Following up, escalating, reporting status, and sharing lessons learned can be difficult skills to master, but they are necessary to being effective as a project manager, as they can make or break the project

Managing Timelines, Risks, Issues

The key to managing the project timeline is being proactive; always be on alert for things that can go wrong and act on them as soon as they become known.

Keeping the Timeline

When delays happen and time buffers built into the project plan are used up, there are only three things IG professionals can do to stay within the original timeline, provided they have management’s approval:

1. Reschedule some tasks to run in parallel.

2. Reduce scope by removing some requirements.
3. Add more resources, although this does not always work and may result in lower team performance.

As desirable as it is to keep the original timeline, do not make the timeline the driving force. Compromising the quality of deliverables to meet the timeline will result in a failed project.

Extending the Timeline

If none of the above measures is workable, the last resort is to *re-base-line*, or officially extend the timeline. Extension may be the only solution warranted by significant issues or scope changes. For example, an organization implementing a cloud-based records management system may discover during testing that – due to a missed or ambiguous requirement – it cannot apply new retention rules on existing data in the event of retention schedule changes. The new system cannot go live until this issue is resolved, so there is no choice but to extend the timeline in this situation.

Managing Risks

Risk management is an important activity that starts during scope definition by engaging stakeholders to identify risks and creating a risk log. The next steps are to analyze risks, document their probability and impact on the project, and create a risk response plan.

Among the risk response strategies that can be utilized are to:

1. Mitigate – Take measures to reduce the probability and/or impact of a risk.
2. Transfer – Shift the negative impact of a risk to a third party, such as the vendor. This does not elimi-

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3. Accept – Take no action, leaving the project to deal with the consequences if risk occurs. The most common acceptance strategy is to use a contingency reserve built into the project budget.

Risks management, like many PM activities, should continue throughout the life of the IG initiative. Existing risks can be changed to a higher or lower probability and impact as the project progresses, new risks may surface and have to be added to the risk log, and risk response strategies may need to be updated.

Managing Issues

The difference between a project “risk” and a project “issue” is that a risk is an uncertain event that may or may not happen, and an issue is an event that has already happened and made some measurable impact on the project. Issues are tracked in an issues log.

It is critical for IG professionals to communicate about issues candidly.

Beware of *confirmation bias*, which is dismissing information that might show the project has issues. This may make the IG professional look good in the short run, but it will set the project up for failure in the long run.

Issues should not be seen as a “bad thing”; they happen on every project and are sometimes outside of anybody’s control. Stay in constant communication with stakeholders, look out for early signs of potential issues, promptly engage the right resources to work on issue resolution, and keep management and customers informed. Don’t be defined by the issue, but how you handle it.

Managing Change

Managing change is a critical activity because projects rarely run according to their original project plans. Rather, the project plan, scope statement, and other deliverables must be maintained by continuously managing the changes.

Many organizations create a change management board consisting of the project sponsor(s), customers, and other stakeholders. Change requests must be documented and include impacts to timeline, cost, risk, and staffing. To maintain the integrity of the project plan and timeline, it is vital to ensure that resources work only on approved change requests. It is recommended to have a formal change management process that outlines the steps for how changes will be requested, reviewed, and approved/rejected.

Monitoring Scope

The most notable and impactful type of change that should be monitored closely is scope change. Uncontrolled scope changes, often referred to as “scope creep,” can make a significant negative impact on the project.

Be very careful if customers or other stakeholders try to “squeeze in” additional requirements after the project scope has been approved.

For example, if the IG initiative is to implement a social media archiving solution and somebody states that it should integrate with the e-discovery application, verify if such integration was included in the scope statement. If it was not, document this requirement as a change request, and go through the change management process for approval.

Preparing Stakeholders

Change management includes preparing stakeholders for the changes that the project will bring. Stakeholders can be divided into three categories:

1. Active supporters – individuals who will accept the change and actively support it
2. Fence sitters – stakeholders who will take a “wait and see” approach
3. Active blockers – people who will be uncomfortable with or critical of the change

The change management goal is to convert active blockers and fence sitters into active supporters. Try these tactics:

- Ask active supporters to coach their peers and their direct reports on the change.
- Recognize and thank active supporters publicly.

- Surround active blockers with active supporters.
- Have active blockers meet with their direct supervisors to review the case for change.

Everyone responds to change differently, and sometimes all it takes is clearer communications. Incorporate training, create an open door policy, avoid jargon and management speak, be transparent about what is known and unknown about the change, be empathetic, and let all know that their voices are heard and that everyone needs to get through the change together.

Reaping the Rewards

Managing project requirements, scope, plan, timeline, risks, issues, stakeholders, communications, and changes requires important PM skills every IG professional should work to develop. Be patient; it certainly takes experience and maybe a few failures to build PM strong skills. It is worth the effort, though, paying rewards in terms of the IG program’s return on investment, satisfied customers, and personal fulfillment. **END**

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