LIBRARY LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Project Management for Assessment: A Case Study

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Overview

In the fall of 2010, librarians in the Davis Library Research and Instructional Services (R&IS) Department at UNC Libraries made the transition from a reference librarian model to a subject librarian model. In this new organizational arrangement, librarians assumed a range of new responsibilities. In addition to the traditional scope of reference librarian responsibilities, R&IS librarians added collection management and other duties to their job responsibilities. In an effort to provide focus for these new roles, the department created a department-level strategic plan. With a strong emphasis on service assessment, one of the plan's key components was an evaluation of the Department's reference desk staffing model.

This article describes the project management techniques and tools that were used to complete this assessment project. This case study is organized into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the context of UNC Libraries and R&IS. The second section provides a brief definition of a project, project management and the project management life cycle. The third section describes the project management tools and techniques that were used to complete this assessment project.

Although this case study describes a specific institutional context, whenever possible, this article emphasizes the elements of project management that are transferable to other library contexts and projects.

The Context at UNC Libraries

UNC Libraries is an Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member with a monographic collection of approximately 7.3 million volumes,[1] and a budget of approximately $24.6 million during the 2010-2011 fiscal year.[2] Within the UNC Libraries system, R&IS provides research services, instruction, collection management and access to the Library's microforms and government documents collection. Housed within the Walter Royal Davis Library, the Department includes fifteen subject librarians and four support staff. The Department also employs around fifteen undergraduate and graduate students during the academic year.

After the transition to the subject librarian model, it became evident that staff needed to carefully evaluate the scope of their responsibilities. One service that was identified as a potential area for reduction was reference services. Consistent with national trends, the number of in-person reference desk interactions in Davis Library has been in consistent decline. Between 2004-2005 and 2009-2010 the Davis Reference Desk, the primary research assistance desk in Davis Library, saw a 37% decrease in in-person reference transactions. In response to these changing user preferences, the reference desk-staffing model has gone through several tweaks over this period, however, in light of the new responsibilities for subject librarians, a reference desk evaluation project was viewed as a key component of ensuring that librarian time was being effectively utilized.

Projects and Project Management

The techniques of project management are well suited to monitoring and controlling the execution of an assessment project. The discipline of project management is focused on the use of knowledge, skills and techniques to execute projects effectively and efficiently. The Project Management Institute, the discipline's major professional association, has distilled the elements of project management practice into the *Project Management Body of Knowledge*, a text often referred to as the *PMBOK*. There are a wide variety of different project management strategies and techniques, however, outside of technology projects, the most common form of project management is called "traditional project management."

The processes of traditional project management fall into five distinct phases:

- Initiating
- Planning
- Executing
- Monitoring and Controlling
- Closing

These phases are sometimes referred to as the project management life cycle. This life cycle can be applied to any activity that fits the definition for a project.[3]

When examining the Project Management Institute's definition of a project, an assessment project fits very neatly into its parameters:

> A project is **temporary** in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources.
>
> And a project is **unique** in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal. So a project team often includes people who don't usually work together […][4]

With these processes in mind, this article will now describe the application of the project management lifecycle to the execution of the desk assessment project.

The Reference Desk Assessment Project

Initiation Phase

The purpose of the initiation phase in the project management lifecycle is to clearly establish expectations for everyone who will be directly involved in or affected by the project.

In this phase, individuals are broken down into two discrete groups:

1) Project sponsor/s: the person or group that has the ability to provide the resources (time, money, technology, and staff) to complete the project. The project sponsor for the reference desk assessment project was the Head, R&IS.

2) Project team: the individuals who will complete the project work. Project team members were selected because of their experience working on the desk, their availability for project-based work, and their interest and skills in conducting library assessment projects. The team included five people, four members from R&IS and one representative from UNC Libraries' R.B. House Undergraduate Library (UL). A UL representative was selected because R&IS and the UL share the staffing of chat reference questions and changes to the staffing schedule had the potential to impact the UL's workload.

After the project team was identified, the project manager led the team in establishing the scope of the project and creating operating rules for the team's work.

Project Overview Statement

The first order of business was for the team to create a Project Overview Statement (POS). A POS is a short document (ideally one page) that concisely states what is to be done in the project, why it is being done, and the value that the project provides to the organization when it is complete.[5]

The POS includes the following elements:

- *Problem or Opportunity*—is a fact that doesn't need to be defined or defended. Everyone should accept this as true.
- *Project Goals*—what you intend to do to address the problem or opportunity. A project should only have one goal.
- *Project Objectives*—what the project will include
- *Success Criteria*—bottom-line impact of your project
- *Assumptions, risks, and obstacles*—things that could go wrong.[6]

Group Decision-Making

Every team-based project involves decision-making. In anticipation of the potential for several challenging decisions, the project team established a common understanding for the team's decision-making process. In order to provide a rigorous yet efficient process for approving decisions, the project team used Andrew Grove's model of the ideal decision-making process.[7]

In Grove's model there are three stages of decision-making. The first stage is free discussion, the second is clear decision and the third is full support.

In free discussion, all members of the group have an opportunity to share their point of view about each of the elements of the decision. At this stage, group members identify issues that needed clarification and discussion. Group members should feel free to debate the issues and disagree with each other's viewpoint.

During the clear decision stage the exact nature of the decision becomes apparent; the decision should be as clear and unambiguous as possible.

The full support phase required that every group member supported (though not necessarily agreed with) the decision. When a group member felt that the full support phase has been reached, they may ask the group for confirmation. Once the group confirmed the decision, the group then moves on to the next issue.

Team Roles and Responsibilities

Within the team, the following roles and responsibilities were outlined:

Project Manager

- Schedules meetings
- Clearly communicate objectives of project and deadlines
- Delegate tasks
- Facilitate discussions
- Sets agendas and run team meetings
- Send out agenda prior to meeting
- Produce meeting minutes and record them in the meeting minutes Google Document

Team Member

- Support a relaxed atmosphere
- Respect other team members
- Allow free discussion of ideas without judgment
- Take responsibility and ownership for his/her assigned tasks while also supporting the work of the entire team
- Participate in all discussions
- Communicates often
- Commits to and meet deadlines

<u>Stakeholders</u>

The next part of the planning process was to conduct a stakeholder analysis. A stakeholder is any person who has an interest in the outcome of the project. A stakeholder analysis is a process that helps the team categorize and organize stakeholders based on their organizational interests in the project and their role in cooperating with the project team.

To categorize the project's stakeholders and prioritize their importance to the planning process the team used the Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed (RACI) organizational schema.[8] The team also used this schema to delineate what information needed to be shared with which stakeholders and how that information would be shared throughout the project life cycle.

This schema was applied in the following manner:

Responsible: These individuals are responsible for completing a task. People in this category include individual team members for the reference desk assessment project. The level of responsibility will vary according to each task and the team member's skills and workload.

Accountable: This person will be held responsible if the task is not completed and is responsible for monitoring the project schedule. This category included the project manager for the reference desk assessment project.

Consulted: Though not accountable or responsible for completion of the project, these individuals are consulted about aspects of the project. This included people from a variety of library departments, Davis R&IS desk students, and Davis R&IS librarians. These individuals and groups were consulted on an as-needed basis. These stakeholder consultations were conducted through in-person conversations with most meetings scheduled via e-mail. In some instances these stakeholders were consulted for their feedback; in other cases they were consulted for their assistance in creating collaborative responses to the project's goal.

Informed: Individuals in the informed category were kept abreast of project developments but do not have accountability or responsibility for the project. For example, although the R&IS desk students were consulted stakeholders at certain points throughout the project, they transitioned to the informed stakeholder status as the project reached maturity.

<u>Planning phase</u>

The planning phase in project management is the phase in which resources, time and tasks are identified and outlined. The first step in the planning phase was the development of a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS). A WBS is a hierarchical representation of all the work that must be done to complete the project as defined in the POS.

A WBS has three distinct purposes: it's used as a thought-process tool, a planning tool, and a status-reporting tool.[9]

Below is the WBS for the desk project:

1. Define components of reference desk service

    1.1. Service points and tasks

    1.2. Staff

    1.3. Staffing hours

    1.4. Budget

2. Identify factors needed for assessment

    2.1 Literature review/environmental scan

    2.2 Find methods we could use for assessment of desk staffing

    2.3 Identify and collect data for assessment of desk staffing

3. Create policy recommendations for desk staffing

    3.1 Explicate service expectations for desk staffing

    3.2 Propose staffing plan for desk services

    3.3 Make training recommendations for desk staff

Executing

The execution phase involves putting the project plan into action. This is the phase in which the project manager coordinates and directs project resources to meet the objectives of the project plan.

For this project, work was primarily divided and delegated on the basis of interest, skills and availability.

We ran team meetings using methods from Andy Grove's book, *High Output Management*. Grove argues that meetings are "the medium of managerial work...the most important work that a manager can do."[10]

Grove identifies two types of meetings:

> *Process oriented meetings* – exchange of knowledge and information
>
> *Mission oriented meetings* – designed to produce a specific output, frequently a decision

By clearly identifying and focusing on the *purpose* of the meeting and each agenda item, the team had highly productive, outcomes-based meetings.

Monitoring and controlling

Answering two simple questions can sum up the monitoring and controlling stage in the project management lifecycle:

> Where are we with this project?
>
> Where should we be with this project?

The team used two primary software tools for monitoring this project. The first was Tom's Planner, a Web-based project management tool that allows for the easy creation of Gantt Charts.[11] A Gantt chart is a bar chart that illustrates a project schedule. The task is placed on the x-axis and the time is placed on the y-axis. A Gantt chart allows project stakeholders to see the start and end of a task and helps to determine the most efficient order for task completion.

Project Closing

Project closing occurs when the project's goal has been reached. It is also an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of project processes, and learn more about what did and did not work.

Upon reaching the project's goal of creating recommendations for optimally staffing the reference desk, the project manager presented the group's recommendations to the R&IS management group. These recommendations were endorsed and all of the recommendations and proposed changes have been implemented.

Endnotes

[1] "University of North Carolina Library - FY 2010-2011 Table 1: Volumes Held."
[2] " University of North Carolina Library - FY 2010-2011 Table VII: Library Expenditures."
[3] "What Is Project Management? | Project Management Institute."
[4] Ibid.
[5] Wysocki, *Effective Project Management*, 91.
[6] Ibid., 93.
[7] Grove, *High Output Management*, 89–91.
[8] Suchan, Jane, "Establish and Manage the Project Stakeholders List - Project - Office.com."
[9] Wysocki, *Effective Project Management*, 126.
[10] Grove, *High Output Management*, 71.
[11] "Project Planner | Online Gantt Chart | Tom's Planner."

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