Avoid project management traps

Andrew Makar is all too familiar with project management challenges. An information technology consultant, he has learned how to avoid potholes and stay on track.

As a business analyst assigned to a one-year HR recruiting project, he worked with a team to design online tools to gather résumés and assess job candidates. Leaders gave the group an overall goal, including a launch date, but no one devised a system to track progress.

Without a project schedule to stipulate who would do what by when, Makar struggled to hold people accountable and identify any slipped tasks. The ever-changing composition of the team made matters worse.

In the tenth month of the project, most of the code was not ready. Everyone felt stressed.

After a team meeting, Makar developed a timeline to help key players complete critical tasks before the launch date. The schedule unified all the participants and focused their efforts.

Makar learned that a project schedule, while time-consuming to assemble and maintain, serves a vital purpose. It takes long-term goals and milestones and turns them into easy-to-track tasks.

Armed with a detailed schedule, project managers gain an early-warning system to indicate poor follow through, delivery issues or other snags. This reduces the odds of nasty surprises as the deadline draws near.

Project leaders learn that time, cost and scope work in tandem to determine a project's success. You cannot change one of these elements without impacting the others.

Case in point: An executive running Makar's project sought to expand its scope while insisting that the time and cost remain fixed. This occurred two weeks before the launch date, setting the stage for a failed outcome.

— Adapted from "The three best lessons I learned from a failed project," Andrew Makar, www.techrepublic.com.