

TECHnically *Speaking*

by **Claudia Winkler** and **David Miller**

Information technology continues to play an important and ever-increasing role in the hotel design and construction process, challenging many traditional practices and providing construction and management professionals with new technical and managerial opportunities to continue to streamline their businesses.

This article aims to examine and discuss the critical factors of successful design, integration and implementation of your systems.

These key areas include:

Defining and Managing the Project Scope

Controlling Costs

Resource Management

Controlling Time

DEFINING AND MANAGING THE PROJECT SCOPE

Executive Sponsorship is the initial step in any project scope. Who are the key decision-makers; who are the key business users responsible for using the system(s) that you will be implementing? Getting these individuals involved from the very beginning is a critical success factor. While the project may be your responsibility to implement, the system being implemented belongs to the key business users. They must be included in the process. Establish “buy-in” from the very beginning so that they will assume ownership and take an active role in the sponsorship and implementation of the project.

If it is unclear as to who has “ownership” or if there is reluctance to take ownership individually, establish a steering committee and allow them to have input into the process and application selection. Feedback, actions, and/or decisions the steering committee needs to be concerned with are most effectively dealt with by providing the team with thorough impact analyses on all proposed solutions or project threads so decisions can be made swiftly and effectively. This will facilitate keeping the project on course within the time parameters set at the beginning. Though it isn't effective to run everything through a committee, a steering committee should be used as a validation of the efforts that the project team is undertaking and the decisions that have been made.

Communication is critical to a project's success. Whether it is daily, weekly or monthly, regularly scheduled communications are essential to ensure all project team members are focused, on task, and kept abreast of the project status at all times. To successfully execute a project of any magnitude, there is no such thing as “too much” communication.

Scope Definition—what strategic priorities are most critical in the application selection process?

Define the project plan (The amount of time needed to design

*Information technology issues:
Things to consider during
during the design, construction
and opening process*



the basic plan will vary depending on the size and scale of the project). It can be as short as two weeks or as long as six months. Critical to the success of any project, IT-related or not, is the development of a strategic plan, which in turn requires the development of a more granular tactical plan of execution. While it is true that project plans change from their inception to completion, a basic framework, or as AAA prefers—“TripTik”—is necessary to help guide your project down the right “highways and by-ways” so you don't get lost or sidetracked along the way.

Once you have your base project plan set up, you will likely need to modify it to meet new legal requirements or customer preferences depending upon a host of issues: How will information technology vary within a specific project thread? Some of these include the hotel size, brand affiliation, product types (casino, extended stay, all-suites, etc.), desired features of the system in question (low-end, budget, economy, upscale), and many other variables. Each plan must be “customized” to meet the needs of the particular system and project.

CONTROLLING COSTS

Simply stated, prepare a budget and manage your budget. Be sure to include all associated costs including vendor review and selection activities, hardware and software costs, cabling, electrical, data center needs, Network Operations Center, HVAC, electrical or UPS issues, back-up generator requirements, end user areas, in-room technology requirements (wireless / high speed internet, printer / fax, etc). Other considerations include data / phone lines, intrusion detection software, intrusion prevention software, etc. This list could go on and on.



Develop processes that manage project accounting. This effort includes vendor proposal reviews, contract processing and tracking, legal processing and tracking, purchase order processing and tracking, deposit processing and tracking, and the processes for ensuring that the budget that was approved is adhered to throughout the planning and implementation. This budget should also be reviewed, revised and updated periodically throughout the project life, not just at the completion of the project. Setting up the processes are only half the battle. Tracking mechanisms are critical to ensure that the process is flowing properly. Lastly, change control is necessary and critical to the success of delivering a project on time, within scope and within budget.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Contrary to popular belief, projects will not run by themselves nor will they be successful if managed by resources that are not fully focused on the project. Examine your internal staffing to select the right individual who has the skill sets needed to manage the project details and who can communicate effectively throughout the organization both vertically and horizontally. In many circumstances, such a resource doesn't exist internally. In such cases, you must look outside your organization. This is a full-time job and cannot be delegated to a senior staff member. It cannot be emphasized enough—the resource(s) that are charged with the successful implementation of your IT projects must possess the right project management skills to get the project successfully past the “finish line.” Settling for something less means that you are willing to compromise the success and the integrity of your project.

Resource management also involves other efforts, including product procurement, expert involvement (business users), system setup and configuration and finally scheduling end-user training. Though easy to overlook, consideration of these resources is just as critical to the overall success of the project and acceptance of the system in the end.

CONTROLLING TIME

Time is either our friend or it is our enemy. In many circumstances, we cannot control the time element in projects. There may be certain “hard” dates that cannot be changed for any reason. With design and construction, there are many variables that have a direct impact such as timelines for regulatory and construction/inspection permits, weather issues, delays in the delivery of construction products and many more.

In a nutshell, we need to control what we have control over. By establishing a detailed timeline in the project plan and communicating it to all members of the project team, both internally and externally, we maximize those areas that we can control.

IMPLEMENTATION, TESTING AND TRAINING

The systems have been selected and configured. You are days away from opening the property. It is critical that the systems are fully tested including all the interfaces. For a hotel project, interfaces could include the room key interface, call accounting, in-room movies, PBX, voice mail, mini-bar, credit card processing, central reservations, website (Internet reservations), point of sale (bars, restaurants, and gift shop) and more.

As part of the original system selection process, your vendors should have provided you with a system acceptance document. In most cases, you will need to “sign off” on the system in order for the vendor to receive final payment. This document can also be used as the road map to test the system and ensure that it is functioning according to the vendor's specifications.

We cannot stress the need enough for adequate training throughout the process. The business users must be trained on the application and the Information Technology support staff must be trained in the system setup and support requirements. There can never be “too much” training. Additionally, make sure that your system contract includes adequate professional service-hours for onsite vendor support from pre-opening (soft opening / play days) through a post implementation period.

A WORD ABOUT VENDORS

Vendor relationships are critical to the success of any IT systems project. While we like to think of the relationship as a “customer-supplier” relationship, we should view the relationship as a partnership. Consider your vendors as an extension of your project team. Include them in meetings, communications, timelines, and all other aspects of your project. By viewing the relationship as a partnership, both organizations will work hard to surface the “win-win” opportunities that will make the relationship and, subsequently, the project a success.

In closing, there are really no right or wrong ways to manage IT projects, especially those that involve design and construction projects. There are “bad ways” and “better ways.” The “better ways” always include strategic and tactical planning, cost and time controls, resource planning and allocation, and communication. The more of these things that can be incorporated into your project, the more likely your project will be successful. ■

Claudia Winkler is President of GHI Solutions, Inc. a Las Vegas-based technology consulting company that provides system selection, gap analysis, vendor management, and strategic technology and project management services for the gaming and hospitality industry. Claudia can be reached at (702) 395-8170 or claudia@ghisolutions.com

David Miller is a Partner with IGMAS Technologies, Inc. IGMAS is an IT consulting organization with offices in Los Angeles and Las Vegas specializing in network infrastructure design and implementation, IT project management, world-wide deployment services and IT outsourcing services specializing in several industries including gaming and hospitality. David can be reached at (702) 407-2655 or dmiller@igmas.com