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www.RoseCoaching.info
Life_Is_Fun@RoseCoaching.info
LauraRose@RoseCoaching.info

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Top 3 ways to delay success

By **Laura Rose, CTACC**

Certified Life Coach

People with goals, visions, and plan (whether we admit it or not) are project managers. To accomplish those goals, we identify tasks and activities. We assign ownership (or blame) to certain deeds and deadlines.

In short, we're coordinating and managing our office product, or own side business or family obligations among the little league soccer schedule, dance classes and birthday parties.

We are inherently successful in everything we do. Sometimes we feel more successful than at other times. The typical speed bumps to our successful accomplishing our goals with our target time frame, usually rests on three major factors.

This article describes the top 3 pitfalls and how best to avoid them.

The pitfalls typically are:

- 1) Imagined Dependencies
- 2) Too few or too many eggs
- 3) Taking things too seriously

Imagined Dependencies

Example 1: One friend complained that he didn't have enough time in the day to do the things he wanted to do. He was getting up too late in the morning, spending too much time on email, phone calls, etc.

His solution was to "be in bed by 11:00pm and get up at 7:00am". This may sound like a reasonable solution. What resulted was that he didn't get to bed by 11:00pm and he wrote off getting up at 7:00am. He would insist that he needed his 8 hours of sleep.

This is an imaginary dependency. Although 8 hours may be a "nice to have", it's not really a "must have". If he just got into the habit of getting up at 7:00am (independent of what time he went to bed), his body would tell him when he needed to rest (to go sleep).

Example 2: Another friend wanted to get a property sold in order to fund some additional projects and go back to school. The housing market was not good, and there were delays in his house sell. So he never went back to school. This is an imaginary dependency, because there are other ways to get funding for school (scholarships, grants, part-time job).

Although true, the above are very simple. Our regular lives and projects have more complicated versions. The Critical Path Identification tool helps identify imaginary dependencies as well as unnoticed dependencies.

Critical Path Identification

Risk management has always been highly publicized as an important project management tool. Yet, we don't really take the time to model or study our workflow to identify the risks, critical paths, or bottlenecks early on. Like defining our level of effort, we often rely on a quick and ad hoc approach, depending on our mental review of past experiences. Very rarely does the risk management exercise involve as much as a peer review of all the tasks and workflows of the project. If we don't understand all the tasks and timing, we don't realize the majority of the risks. If you don't realize the risks, you can't manage them.

A very effective and easy way to quickly and visibly identify risks in a project is to outline the process workflow in a visual flowchart. The workflow method can be used to analyze anything: Workflow analysis is effective on component dependencies, process step dependencies, even resource conflicts. Consider the diagram of a process in Figure 5, which outlines the different components under development. Specific colors represent the different human resources required to complete the activity, while the estimated duration is in ().

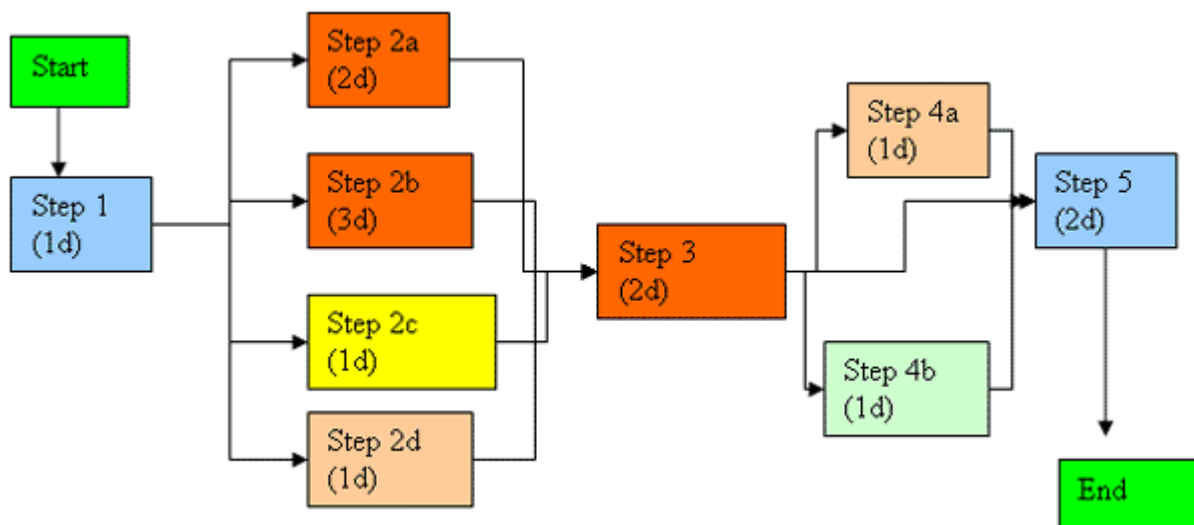


Figure 5: Process WorkFlow A: Mapping the workflow makes it clear that Step 3 and resource "orange" are the bottlenecks.

The diagram reveals some significant implications regarding the resource allocation proposed. Note that without resource considerations, the length of time through the critical path is nine days (longest time through the various sequential steps). But because we've used the same resource to do Step 2a, Step 2b, and Step 3, we need to add an additional two days. Why? Because even though the steps are not dependent on each other, the resources performing those steps are. We are now up to 11 days.

Continuing with our analysis, if there are several input lines going into and out of a step or resource, you have visually identified an architectural or structural bottleneck. In this simple example, there are multiple items dependent on that Step 3; therefore, we have a real bottleneck not only in the resource but in the architecture. Unless Steps 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d are all completed at the right time, Step 3 can't be done. If the resource on Step 3 is stuck on Step 2b, progress is completely blocked. No other steps can be started. This places the "orange" resource on the critical path. If we wait until the teams have started coding, and we actually hit the bottleneck, there is little we can do about it, because the orange resource is already deeply committed. He is the only one who knows the code in Step 2a and Step 2b, and he's probably coded additional assumptions into all three steps because he's the single owner of that code. He has complicated the interdependencies to make it faster to complete (once again, because he is the single owner). He is pretty much entangled, such that we can't efficiently add a resource to help him.

Mapping the workflow makes this problem visually clear and provides us a way to avoid it before the project even starts. Consider the improvements illustrated in Figure 6.

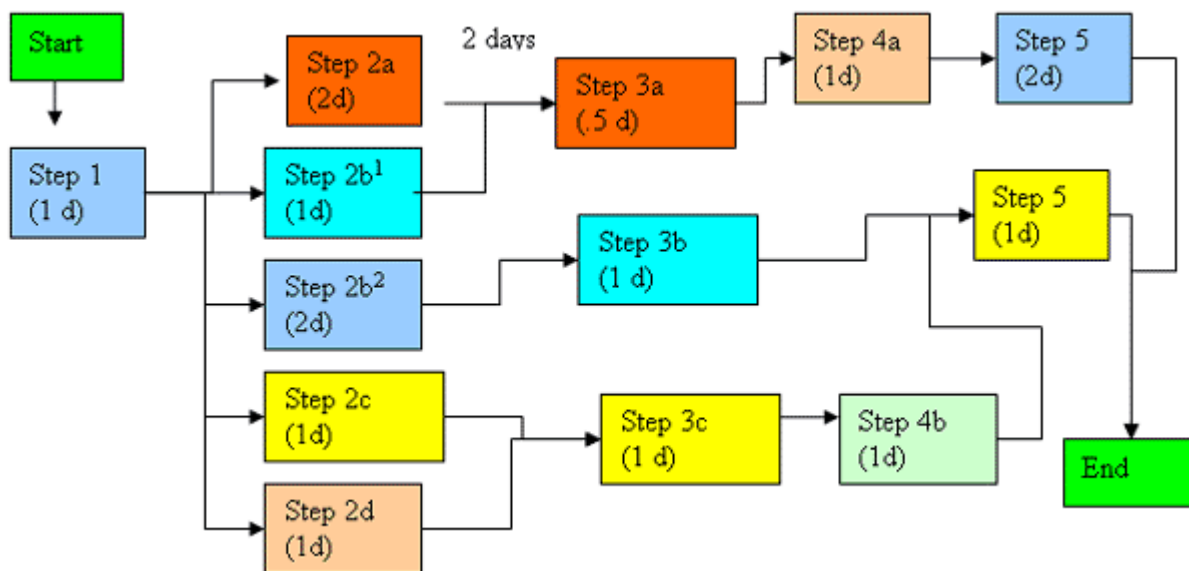


Figure 6: Workflow B: Once you've diagrammed your initial flow, you optimize to correct the risks and bottlenecks around the dependent components and resources.

Once you've diagrammed your initial flow, you optimize to correct the risks and bottlenecks around the dependent components and resources. In this example, although I've split my tasks into additional steps, my critical path is just seven days (shorter than my original scheme). I still feel that the orange resource -- Step 3a -- is a potential bottleneck, so I schedule a two-day buffer before the potential bottleneck. This allows all the sub-steps (Steps 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d) to accumulate in a slight holding pattern. This stabilization period is a great way to incorporate mid-cycle validations, defect fixing, and quality audit checkpoints.⁷ Although I have reduced the risk of bottlenecks and provided some additional lead time to the critical path, I haven't added any time to the overall project plan.

I also acknowledge that skill level of the resources is not 100 percent interchangeable. But the fact remains, if we haven't done this level of workflow analysis, we don't know that we can't

redistribute, reorder, or restructure to take better use of the resources and skill level that we have. In this example, the orange resource was required to do Step 3 in Workflow A, only because there was a portion of Step 3 that needed an advanced level of multi-threaded Java design. When we take the time to split that piece away from the rest of the component, we find that several other resources could do the rest of Step 3. If we had otherwise identified that the orange resource had critical skills no one else had, we could reposition the orange resource into designing and architecting so that others could take his well-designed specifications and easily code from those artifacts.

Another advantage of this project management technique is that it avoids the over-padding (or sand-bagging) that we might experience when individuals pad for each of their tasks. We allow an additional time buffer associated with the critical path, and not the other tasks. The other non-critical path tasks already have an inherent buffer with the critical long pole.

If you do not map alternative workflows from the onset, you can easily get trapped. After you are already in the middle of the project and have the programmers entrenched in the code, many of these alternatives are closed to you. So the essence of this tip is that mapping or modeling your workflow early provides multiple options and alternatives.

Additional tip:

Don't use your favorite scheduling tool (like Microsoft Project, Modeling tool, or Gantt charts) to do this initial workflow. These tools entice you to model in a vacuum. Use Post-it® notes and a large white board to make it easy for teams and groups to participate in the organization and remodeling. Multiple eyes see things that an individual will miss. This also helps build interpersonal relationships and group accountability at the same time.

Only after your team is happy with the optimization should you create the path in your favorite scheduling or modeling tool for periodic and iterative reviews and updates.

Too few or too many eggs

The above example regarding the selling of the house being the “silver bullet” to this friend’s problems is an example of “too few eggs in his basket”. The solution was to incorporate other fund-raising tasks to cover his bills and schooling, while leaving the sale of the house to fund this larger renovation projects.

Another stumbling block is the opposite problem: too many projects.

Example 3:

Another friend had many on-going “side-projects” from a home-base candle selling business, to piano instructions, volunteering, quilt making, etc. Her real passion was to start a full-time business in consultant, but was unwilling to let go of any of her other projects. She wasn't making much head-way with any one business. Yet she had a difficult time saying “no” when other project opportunities appeared. She often got disgusted and exhausted when she walked into her den, because she had all her “incomplete” projects laid out there.

In the above example, our friend was too conflicted. She was torn in too many different directions that she could not focus her energy on any successful endeavor.

One recommendation is to pick a niche or business goal, and develop

Risk Management:

One of the major components in Project Planning and Management is Risk Management. Many will say this is critical to any project plan. It's the act of identifying "what might go wrong" with the current project plan (Plan A) and preparing contingency plans (Plan B).

But how does it fit with Law Of Attraction. Wouldn't focusing on "what might go wrong" actually "make things go wrong"? Are we not planning for failure at this point? What's the deal?

Law of Attraction is not in conflict with and actually supports Risk Management.¹

While it's true that "planning for Plan B" increases the possibility of making Plan B happen, it's really all about how you feel.

If you are 100% confident about Plan A, you have worked with these people before, you've done similar projects several times before, you're experienced with the location, environment, market, timing, you are excitedly anticipating Plan A – then you don't need a Plan B.

But if there is something unfamiliar or uncomfortable about a piece of plan A, and having a Plan B on that particular piece makes you **feel better** – you should have a Plan B on that piece.

Risk management isn't about struggling to find everything that could possibly go wrong with your project or product. In fact, very little time is actually spent on "the possible/probable/potential problem. Majority of the time is spent on the solution or "how you would like the event to flow". Majority of Risk Management is "how to feel better about XXX". It's focused on the "contingency" piece.

And Risk Management is not done for everything, only the pieces that you feel uncomfortable about (i.e. only the pieces that have a high probability of occurring and a high impact to the outcome).

Taking things too seriously

The most magnificent creators and innovators don't want to get together with people who think just like they do. They're looking for people who have other thoughts, because out of the contradiction, comes ideas that could not be born out of sameness. Your relationships will be ultimately more if you're not identical twins just "yessing, yessing, yessing" to everything that the other one is about.

Competency and confidence in ones talent and team is critical to any project. The more enriched and evolved the group, the more flexible and adaptable we can be. While there is merit in procedures and "everyone moving in the same direction", the most successful project leaders understand the need for flexibility, ingenuity, and the ability to adapt.

¹ The Law of Attraction is a universal law. Therefore, by definition is cannot be in conflict with anything in the universe.

Follow your instincts about such things and don't talk your original detail processes and plans so rigorously.

The next section covers some techniques and strategies to stay on top of your game when "things happen".

Things happen

Do you find that the busier you are, the more interruptions and requests you get? Many of us spend more time switching from task to task than actually accomplishing something. This can cause us to lose patience and actually avoid teammates, since we just want to be left alone!

I call this the paradox of "busy," because what you *want* to do and what you *need* to do are opposite.

In truth, the busier we are, the more patience we need, because everything takes longer.² The more in-demand we are, the more important it is to talk to people. The larger the load, the more we need to collaborate, delegate, and work in teams.

Bear in mind that your teammates aren't necessarily aware of your current list of commitments; they are only focused on the things they need. If you can take the time to explain your detail task list and deadlines, then they have a framework and background for your situation. If you plot out when in the schedule you can reasonably accommodate their requests, you will see that they are also reasonable and that your time line is fine with them. All this requires patience and understanding.

We often assume that a new request is about something urgent, important, and needed right away. That's not always the case. Discussing both your situation and their specific needs sets the groundwork to discuss priorities. The other advantage of talking to your teammates about the various tasks and timetables is that they may have already done something similar and can save you the effort. You may find some surprising synergy, collaboration, and networking opportunities.

It helps to interpret the events from different perspectives. Busy isn't synonymous with chaotic. ASAP doesn't mean drop everything, although some people assume "as soon as possible" means "as soon as *humanly* possible." Busy just means actively or fully engaged or occupied, and ASAP usually means as soon as *reasonably* possible. With some patience and communication, it is possible to control and structure a hectic schedule.

The more parallel tasks are required in a schedule, the more lead time and slack is needed. As you take on more tasks, expect more unexpected events associated with each task. Since the unexpected is a part of life in and out of the office, the efficient and realistic schedule anticipates them and their effect on the ideal sequence of accomplishments. Without well-structured safeguards, one incident (or added task) will

cause a domino effect. Without well-planned buffers, we squander time switching from task to task without accomplishing much. With strategically placed cushions in your schedule, you position opportunities to accommodate the anomalies without impacting your overall timeline. You can now safely schedule unexpected requests at the next available break.

Sprints and buffers

One way to better ensure that you have a convenient stopping point for an unexpected emergency is to incorporate short sprints and buffers.

Consider this example: We have Tasks A and B, both of which we've estimated at eight days each, taking a total of 16 days in our schedule, as shown in the upper portion of Figure 1. We start off, but at the end of the third day we get an emergency task to accomplish. We spend the next day on the emergency, do some cleanup, and reset to get back to Task A. Because of some additional setup and log review to remember where we exactly left off, we have to re-evaluate how long this will now take. We re-estimate that it will take us about seven more days to complete Task A, because of the overhead of the interruption. After another two days, we get another emergency, and the churn begins again. At the end, we've actually spent over 12 days on the *actual* Task A (2 days spent for Task A + 1 day for the interrupting EmergencyA + 2 days spent to continue Task A + 1 day for the interrupting EmergencyB + 6 re-estimated days to complete Task A), as shown in the lower portion of Figure 1.

We're not only four days late in delivering Task A to those who need it, we're also holding up the people working and waiting on Task B.

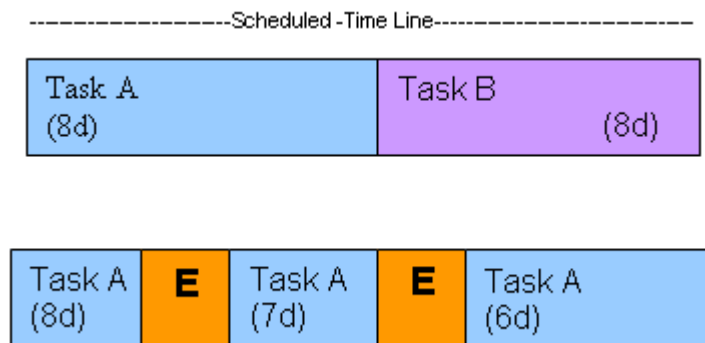


Figure 1: Emergency Sample A includes an initial 8 day estimate for Task A. After 2 days of work on Task A, an emergency occurs. After the emergency is dealt with, we re-estimate that it will now take 7 days to actually complete Task A (to cover interruption overhead). After another interruption is dealt with, we re-estimate that it will take 6 days to finally complete Task A.

A better way to approach this is to break the Task A and subsequent Task B into smaller, self-contained activities, or sprints, as shown in Figure 2. We schedule some buffer time between each sprint. The total schedule timeline for Task A has now

increased from the original eight days to eleven. Let's see what happens with this same example.

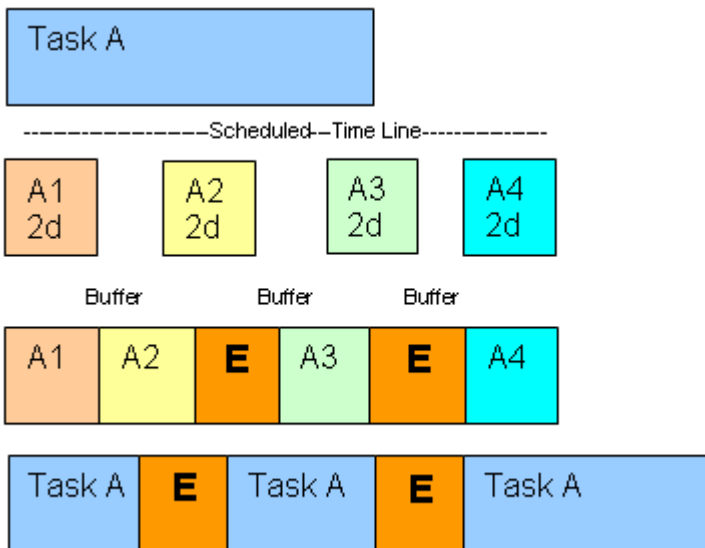


Figure 2: By incorporating sprints and buffers in our schedules, we can see that the actual timeline for the sprint strategy (A1, A2, A3, A4) accommodated both the emergencies and the schedule obligations. The Task A method took much longer and missed the schedule targets.

We start with Task A1. After two days, no emergencies have come up. We start on Task A2 without delay. At the end of the first day of A2 (third day into the exercise) the emergency arises, but because we can explain that we will be at a good stopping point at the end of tomorrow, the emergency is scheduled at that time.³ When we've completed A2, we spend time on the emergency. Once again, we don't automatically stop what we are doing and absorb the overhead of switching tasks at this point. This example continues in this manner as another emergency appears after the start of A3.

Although the initial timeline based on a sprints-and-buffers method is longer than the original Task A, the expectations are more realistic and the results are closer to the actual. People depending on the total Task A (A1, A2, A3, A4) are delivered those pieces on time and sometimes even ahead of schedule, and Task B items are not impacted.

If a request comes in that's more urgent and important than what you are currently doing (i.e., the requester cannot wait until your next available break in your schedule), go to your manager to make sure everyone is aware of the priorities, impact, and consequence regarding the schedule change. People will usually understand and accept this approach, because it is based on priorities that have consequences for the business, and it compares the relative worth and interdependency of each activity. By doing this prioritization and comparison with your manager, you clarify the value of each activity regarding the overall project schedule.

Time boxing

Another hazard that topples schedules is flattery. Now that you're known for your expertise in one area, you are the "go to" person in other similar but peripheral areas. It's difficult to say "no" to a coworker or another manager, especially when they preface the request with "It should only take you five minutes." That little voice in our heads says, "Sure, you can spare just five minutes for your friends and other managers." But five minutes often turn into half-a-day, and your manager is still waiting for your daily progress report, and that was due last night.

A good technique is to time box these "extra requests."⁴ Schedule a convenient five-minute meeting with your friend in which he or she explains the issue to the best of his or her ability. Use that information to estimate how long it might take you. Check your calendar or schedule to see if you can fit the appropriate time and explain, "I can spend nnn minutes on this at 10:00 on day XXX. If we haven't discovered or fixed the problem by then, we will need to re-evaluate the level of effort required, the priority of this, and get my manager involved." After that appropriate time limit has expired then **STOP** and re-evaluate. Time boxing is a great way to say "yes" without introducing chaos.

With the above strategies you are still a team player without derailing your other commitments. But these strategies depend upon a detail task list of what you are doing, by when, for whom and why (priority).

Additional tip:

Many time-management books suggest the "Just Say No" technique. But sometimes it's wiser to say "yes" the right way, on your own terms and when it fits with your priorities and values.

Conclusion:

When we have many things happening that capture our attention, it's easy to drift off compass without knowing. We often get tangled in the details of the process that we lose focus on the main goal. Main recommendation is to continuously review and modify what you are really after.

Lighten up. Things happen that make it impossible to follow the plan exactly.. (That's why every project management tool like MicrosoftProject has both planned and actual timelines). Things happen.

The skill is not in the staying exactly to plan. The skill (and fun) is how quickly you can get back in balance and back on the main target.

About the author

Laura is a certified personal life coach. She is also the Time Management Advisor for National electronic magazine: eXaminer.com. Read more of her time management articles <http://www.examiner.com/x-16459-Raleigh-Time-Management-Examiner>

She has been in the software and testing industry for over 20 years. She's worked with such companies as IBM, Eriksson, Staples, Fidelity Investments and Sogeti in various client advocacy and project management roles. The techniques she uses in her business coaching and client advocacy work saved these companies both time and money, which resulted in on-time, quality product delivery with higher client satisfaction.

Laura now uses her client focus, project, quality and people management skills in her personal life coaching career. As a personal life coach, she helps people integrate their goals and dreams into their everyday lives. Laura uses creative and practical tools to help her clients realize what really matters to them. They then follow-through with project and time management techniques to create the reality they really want.

Laura authors many articles and workshops on time management and strategic scheduling. She is also the founder of the electronic magazine *the Rose Garden: the Art of Becoming*. Also, check out <http://thelaurarose.blogspot.com/>

Laura offers **one-on-one career and life coaching, small group coaching, seminars and workshops**. You can learn more about her at www.RoseCoaching.info and contact her at LauraRose@RoseCoaching.info