

Managing complex and difficult projects

Tips on how to manage complex and difficult technical writing projects

Ever been involved in a difficult or terribly complex project that's gone bad? Read on.

Introduction

As a technical communications agency focussed on providing a service to our clients, we know too well the mantra *The Customer is Always Right*. Here's the thing - solutions and delivery work best when you truly believe that.

This does not mean that we necessarily always agree with the customer, but that we attempt to understand why things are organised or done the way they are *from the customer's point of view*.

Customers will always be able to rattle off a dozen reasons why a product doesn't work like it should, why they think it works best as it is, why the technical documentation cannot be reviewed, why the specifications or product software is not available, or why there are no resources to complete a task. Our role as an agency is to listen and understand the client and provide advice and support where we are able, within the limits defined by our contractual relationship.

Often, as a supplier, we may not know the real or historical reasons for the decisions

or organisational hierarchies we encounter. We must deal with the situation as we find it. Sometimes that means entering dysfunctional workplaces with disgruntled employees who are not talking to each other or to their suppliers.

Thankfully, most organisations that we've worked with have had a healthy working culture and environment, but there are always elements that may be difficult or frustrating from a supplier's point of view.

Putting ourselves in the customer's shoes - both the business and the individuals we deal with - helps us to understand the customer and enables those working on the project to adopt a more positive approach to the project and the client. The approach of *us versus them* can be self-defeating, and any problems are always best approached from a "we" perspective. In other words, how do we sit down with our client and work together towards a common solution?

Adopting an open, friendly and helpful approach to a client is a cornerstone of a successful project and ongoing business partnership.

If you believe that something is hard or difficult - then it will be

If you believe that something is hard or difficult, then it is more likely to be so. Our attitudes can shape our ability to solve problems and find solutions.

A negative attitude towards a project or client can lead authors to seeing problems and issues where there are none, to feelings of being unable to cope on a project and to an inability to move forward, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophesy.

This is an aspect of human nature with a number of facets. Fear of failure or feelings of inadequacy can hamper those working on a project from being fully engaged and productive. Fear of taking risks or attempting creative solutions can lead to passivity and the inability to make decisions. Sometimes this is a result of an authoritarian or restrictive management style that disempowers employees and does not enable them to take responsibility for their own decisions. Sometimes it is a result of the personality or experience of the individual. Individuals can often create unnecessary stumbling blocks to achieving a solution, hampering the delivery of a project.

We've seen it many times, where technical authors get 'stuck' because they don't have access to information they need, or a reviewer has not gotten back to them, or

they can't move ahead without receiving a decision or authorisation (which in many cases is unlikely to ever come).

Sometimes authors or client employees are afraid to do anything or make a decision on their own, resulting in further project delays.

Often this approach has to do with an atmosphere of mistrust, which is part of the work culture or a response to previous experience. The solution is not to point a finger at anyone - client or author - but to understand the circumstances and attempt to resolve them.

You don't always need *all* the answers to be able to work towards a solution. It is here where adopting a positive perspective is important. Approaching a situation or problem with an open mind and an enthusiastic '*can-do*' attitude is much more likely to result in a positive outcome.

Staying on top of complex projects

In complex projects involving many facets, delivery elements and parties, good organisational and communication skills are vital. We've found that a number of other elements are essential to ensuring that projects run smoothly:

- Transparent, open and regular communication between all parties

- Project planning and organisation, in particular to ensure that resources are available, both on the client and agency side
- Mutually agreed priorities, milestones and delivery schedule
- Appropriate project management.

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On a complex project, often two project managers are required to ensure a smooth delivery: one on the client side, and one from the agency side.

A client project manager is likely to be responsible for an overall product or service delivery, of which the documentation is a single component. The client project manager is essential for liaising with and chasing reviewers and employees within the organisation where we, as an external agency, are unable to do so.

A project or account manager from our agency is also essential, to ensure that the document project is properly scoped, budgeted and scheduled, and that appropriate resources are available to fulfil the delivery. Their role is also essential in ensuring transparent and regular communication with the client.

