



Chapter XX

Setting Up to Fail: The Case of Midwest MBA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A mantra of experienced project managers is “failing to plan = planning to fail.” In the case of Midwest MBA, a user group is not satisfied with the progress made by the central computing staff on the development of a much-needed information system. In a well-intentioned effort to help the users, the IS staff of the end-user area (who had been acting in a liaison role between the user area and central computing) decided to take on the completion of the system. However, the resources needed to absorb this additional project were never accurately estimated, obtained, or allocated. Moreover, tasks and target dates were never firmly established. Although the decision to take on the completion of the system was a noble one, the IS staff ended up providing a demonstration of the project manager mantra. Not only was the system not completed, but the IS staff’s regular duties suffered as well. Animosity between the IS staff and users became rampant and both parties considered the system to be a failure. Put simply, the IS staff was not dealing in reality. And, as a result, they set themselves up to fail. This case is based on actual events in a real organization. We have, however, changed the identities of the parties involved and other key information to preserve anonymity.

BACKGROUND

Midwest MBA is the administrative division responsible for managing the MBA program in a large midwestern U.S. public university. The MBA program has existed for many years and is nationally renowned. Midwest MBA attracts students from throughout the United States as well as students from around the world. Currently, about 300 of approximately 750 applicants are accepted into the two-year program annually.

The university currently employs a hybrid IS organizational structure. A central computing group provides an enterprise-wide database and technology infrastructure, and decentralized IS staffs are located within many business units of the university. Midwest MBA is one of the business units that has its own IS staff.

Midwest MBA is chaired by Harry Headhoncho, a professor from the School of Business faculty. He receives release time from most teaching and research duties to manage the program. Headhoncho is primarily involved in fund-raising, public relations, and the general promotion of Midwest MBA, as opposed to details associated with the daily operation of the program. Much of Headhoncho's time is spent away from the office on local and worldwide travel.

Reporting directly to this chair is the assistant dean of the program, Melvin Midlevel, who manages the day-to-day operations of Midwest MBA. The assistant dean has a staff of 13 people, divided into four functional areas: Admissions/Financial Aid, Student Services, Information Systems, and Office Management. The mix of professional and clerical staff is approximately equal. Figure 1 shows the organizational chart, minus several 12 hour/week graduate assistants allocated to the department.

The staff of Midwest MBA takes pride in knowing their students. One of the major goals of Midwest MBA is to track every relevant piece of information about a student, from the time the student first requests an information packet to the time he or she leaves the program and obtains employment. This information helps the staff to provide personal, high-quality service to prospective and enrolled students, as well as alumni of the program. The staff also uses this information to respond to queries by various internal and external organizations, such as accreditation groups and the graduate school of the university. The information is vital in recruiting new students and working with the many groups that rank MBA programs. A large coordination effort is required of the functional areas of Midwest MBA to collect this data and facilitate needed access to it.

As one can imagine, it can be quite time-consuming to amalgamate the volume of information needed when dealing with about six hundred enrolled students at any given time. The Student Services area alone is required to produce over 30 reports per year. The admissions report is typically over thirty pages long and is run weekly for use by the Midwest MBA chairperson and assistant dean. A representative sample of required reports is provided in Table 1. Simply stated, Midwest MBA is an information intensive operation.

SETTING THE STAGE

Until the late 1980s, almost all student data were kept in paper folders within Midwest MBA's offices. Each student folder contained information such as demographic data, application materials, and grade reports. Some information was collected directly

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