14 Ways to Be the World's Worst Web Project Manager

By Chris Roane

There are a great number of ways to manage website projects, but regardless of your management style, there are behaviours that you should learn to avoid as much as possible. Steering clear of these pitfalls will not only allow you to get through projects on time and on budget, but will leave a very good impression on your clients, and win you more work in the future.

1. Let Interruptions Dictate Your Schedule

Too often we allow ourselves to be distracted from what we need to be focusing on right now. Mostly it's unnecessary to jump on every new e-mail immediately; issues can usually wait until we're done with the current task.

As a project manager, you'll most likely be in charge of multiple projects and employees at the same time. It's important to have a system that allows you to have a lot on your plate and still be on top of things. This could include creating a priority list when you check your e-mail/voicemail messages, or when you're available for meetings. The key here is to make sure you get done what needs to be done.

Tim Ferriss wrote a great blog post on the topic called The Not-To-Do List: 9 Habits to Stop Now; I highly recommend you check it out.

2. Don't Communicate Clearly With Your Clients

The way you communicate through e-mail and voicemail will be reflected in how clients perceive you. This can include both the clarity and conciseness of your writing, as well as spelling and grammar. Often I'll re-read an e-mail three to five times before I send it out, just to make sure I catch any remaining glitches.

Keep in mind that clients typically respond better to shorter e-mails and voicemails. Write short, focused messages that communicate key information and action points. Sometimes you need a long e-mail to clearly explain an involved concept or process, but as a general rule make a consistent effort to trim the fat.

When I have a choice between a phone call and an e-mail, I usually stick to e-mails, as they provide a communication trail that I can access later on. This is especially valuable when dealing with clients who are busy and forget to read the e-mail, because you can go back and resend it at a later time if necessary.

3. Keep Your Clients Guessing

Nobody likes to feel out of the loop. The more time you spend in making it clear to your clients what your team is working on, the more they'll appreciate your work.

All this usually takes is an e-mail letting them know what you achieved today or in the last few days, and what your team is going to work on next. I also find this is a great opportunity to remind the client of anything you're still waiting to receive from them (content or images, for example), and the timeframe within which you need to receive it in order to avoid holding up your process.

4. If You're Not Going to Meet a Deadline, Don't Tell the Client

As I outlined in the previous point, this scenario can be prevented by doing a good job of keeping the client in the loop. If you do find you're going to be unable to meet a deadline, make it very clear to the client why this is happening.

Say that you originally thought that integrating a new API was going to take two hours, and it ended up taking eight hours. The client should be made aware of this as soon as it happens. You could word it like this: "We originally thought integrating X was going to take 2 hours, but we had issues making their examples work and it ended up taking much longer than we anticipated. I do apologise for the delay, but we'll do our best in making up the lost time."

The client should be made aware of any delays that will affect a deadline well before that deadline. If you end up telling the client this on the day of the deadline, then you've spent too little time planning and communicating to the customer what your team is doing or of any delays you've encountered.

5. Always Underestimate the Resources Needed for a Project

The scenario: Client A wants a website "just like Facebook," but is only willing to pay $5,000 for it. We think we can cut a few corners to make this happen, and so we agree to do it for $5,000 to keep the client happy. What happens is that the project takes much more time than we'd originally thought it would, and either our company ends up wearing the cost of the extra time spent on the project, or we displease the client when they receive a finished product at odds with what they expected.

This can be prevented by doing a good job in estimating the time and cost of each element in a project, and being honest about the scenario when speaking with the client. If your client thinks you can build a site like Facebook for $5,000, perhaps you could be doing a better job helping them understand how much time goes into various elements of site design and development.

Another option is to present them with a realistic estimate of what can be done with their proposed budget, and possibly come up with a plan that includes a series of development phases. This way, they can kick-start their project with the budget they have, and then expand on it later when more funds are available.

6. If a Client is Being Rude, Respond in Kind

It's always in the best interest of your company to be professional. If a client is growing agitated over the phone, it's advisable to say something like: "I'm sorry to hear that this is happening. My team will look into it immediately and get back to you." Having a shouting match with your client will usually end badly, and could potentially land you in trouble with your boss.

Knowing when you're becoming too worked up takes a level of maturity and professionalism. By realising your error at the time, you can make amends to turn the situation around and please the customer.

7. Never Admit to Making a Mistake

Most clients won't be upset with you if you make a mistake, as long as you're honest about it and take steps to avoid the same problem happening again. They understand that you're human and will make mistakes. The key is to avoid making the same mistakes over and over again; otherwise, your apologies will be hollow.

Usually, just explaining to the client in an e-mail what happened is enough to satisfy them. Making sure to fix the issue immediately will give you bonus points in the eyes of your client, because that communicates that you care about what you do.

If you're giving your client access to an area that you're still working on, or that you know has bugs, you should clearly communicate to them that it's a staging area, and that your team is still ironing out the bugs. If there are major bugs, it's a good idea to let the client know about them specifically, so that they won't have a panic attack when they come across them.

8. Shift Blame to Someone on Your Team

If you're a project manager, you're responsible for your team. If a team member makes a mistake and you fail to catch it before the client, it's ultimately your fault. Your instinct to shift blame might come from trying to protect the client's image of you personally, but more frequently it will have the opposite effect. Trying to shift responsibility for mistakes just makes it look like you're not paying attention to your team's work.

You should, however, still talk to the team member about their mistake. But think about it from the client's perspective: they just need to know that you're in control of your team. The occasional slip-up won't hurt the client's perception of you in any significant way. But pay very close attention to the mistakes your team members make, and ensure they're learning from them.

Furthermore, each and every person on your team needs to earn your trust, so that you feel comfortable taking full responsibility for their work in your dealings with clients.

9. Don't Double-check Your Team's Work

We're all human, and on occasion we'll make mistakes. But part of being a project manager, as I've already outlined, is taking responsibility for the team's work. And that means ensuring that as well as being bug-free, the site also works the way the client expects it to work.

Project managers need to connect the dots in ways that their team may miss. Does the gallery do everything the client wants it to do? What exactly is listed for this area in the agreement? Is the site compatible with the major browsers? Running through a simple checklist like this will not only make sure that the project meets the specifications of the agreement, but allows us to improve on the work that our team produces, which ultimately reflects on us.

10. Spend Very Little Time Writing E-mails

A quickly written e-mail to which little attention was paid can be easy to misinterpret.

You want to ensure that you're clear and concise in your e-mails. If you need the client to send you anything, make sure to outline everything you need in a numbered list. The same goes for any questions you have. This makes it easy for them to respond via e-mail, because they can reference each of your inquiries by number. Never put a bunch of questions or requests in a paragraph, as they'll frequently be missed.

If you need to receive an item before you can continue work on part of the project, make this very clear in your communication with the client. In fact, I suggest bringing this up multiple times. If these factors will affect a deadline, make that clear to the client. For example, you could word it as follows: "Please keep in mind that if we're still going to make the 10/10/2010 launch, we'll need to receive the content for the website by 2/10/2010."

I always aim to sound gracious when writing to a customer via e-mail. It might take a little bit more time to achieve the right tone, so that you're sure it won't be misread, but avoiding misunderstandings with your clients is well worth the effort.

11. Don't Get to Know Your Team

If you're managing a team, it's your responsibility to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the team, as a whole and of each member. Managing a project shouldn't be like a game like Russian roulette, where you're never sure what your team is going to produce. As project managers, we need to do put ourselves in a position to succeed. Below are a few questions that may help you:

- What does this team member's code look like?
- Will they be able to complete their part of the project on time?
- How reliable have they been in the past?
- If they fall behind, what is my backup plan?
- Does it make sense to have this team member work on a project that is this complicated?
- Have they worked on other projects with a similar level of responsibility?
- Will it be more work for me to have them work on this?

12. Assume Your Team is on Schedule

A project that was on time last week could suddenly find itself well behind schedule, because an element that you thought was done properly turns out to have been botched, or because a team member misunderstood what needed to be done.

Set up firm deadlines for your team, but give them some cushion for any unexpected items that arise. Make sure that your team members clearly communicate with you if they're unable to meet a deadline, and train them to do this long before the deadline arrives. Make it very clear that you're okay with them asking you questions on a project, and that you would rather have them ask more questions than to assume.

With a big project, this becomes even more important, because being behind in one area could affect the whole project. Make sure you're doing a solid job on what should be prioritised. If half your team has to wait on one team member to achieve what they need to do, that item should be on top of your priority list so that no time is lost.

13. Don't Create a System to Remind You to Contact Clients

If you're managing many different projects, and you have a long list of clients that you've worked with in the past, it's easy to lose track of who's waiting on an e-mail from you. You need some kind of system that allows you to know who you need to contact. This could be as simple as having a folder or label in your e-mail system for e-mails that require a response. That way, when you want to play catch-up, it's very easy to determine who's still to be contacted.

It looks extremely bad if you constantly forget to respond to client e-mails, or if you're slow in getting back to people. Even if you're busy, you need to let your clients know when you expect to be able to deal with their query. I have found this method to be very effective, and it gives me some extra time to prioritise and figure out what I need to jump onto next.

14. Come into Meetings Ill-prepared

Even if it's difficult to be 100% prepared for everything in a meeting, you should never go into a meeting unsure of what you're going to say when they ask you about specifics on the project. If you're asked for a detail you're unsure of, let them know that you will look into it and get back to them later. Don't make promises that are impossible for you to keep, or that you're unsure about, even if they push you for answers. This includes deadlines and timeframes.

In whatever you're talking about, be confident. You're the expert in your field, not the client. But just make sure you're very deliberate in what comes out of your mouth. The main objective of the meeting should be to convince the client that you're in control, and that they made a good choice in going with you. Even if you're behind, or if something went wrong, how you word it can determine the success or failure of the meeting.

I have found that in most meetings that happen during the course of a project, the client is mainly looking for reassurance. Do not give them any reason to doubt that it's all under control, and you'll have a happy client who loves to work with you!

We all make mistakes, and the area of managing web projects is far from immune to human error. But if we're deliberate in learning from our mistakes, and learn how to improve on what we've done in the past, we can keep our clients, bosses, and team members happy, and lead our projects to success.

Chris has filled many different roles including programmer, developer, project manager, production manager and general programmer. His passion is to develop efficient and reusable code, and create products that look and function well.

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