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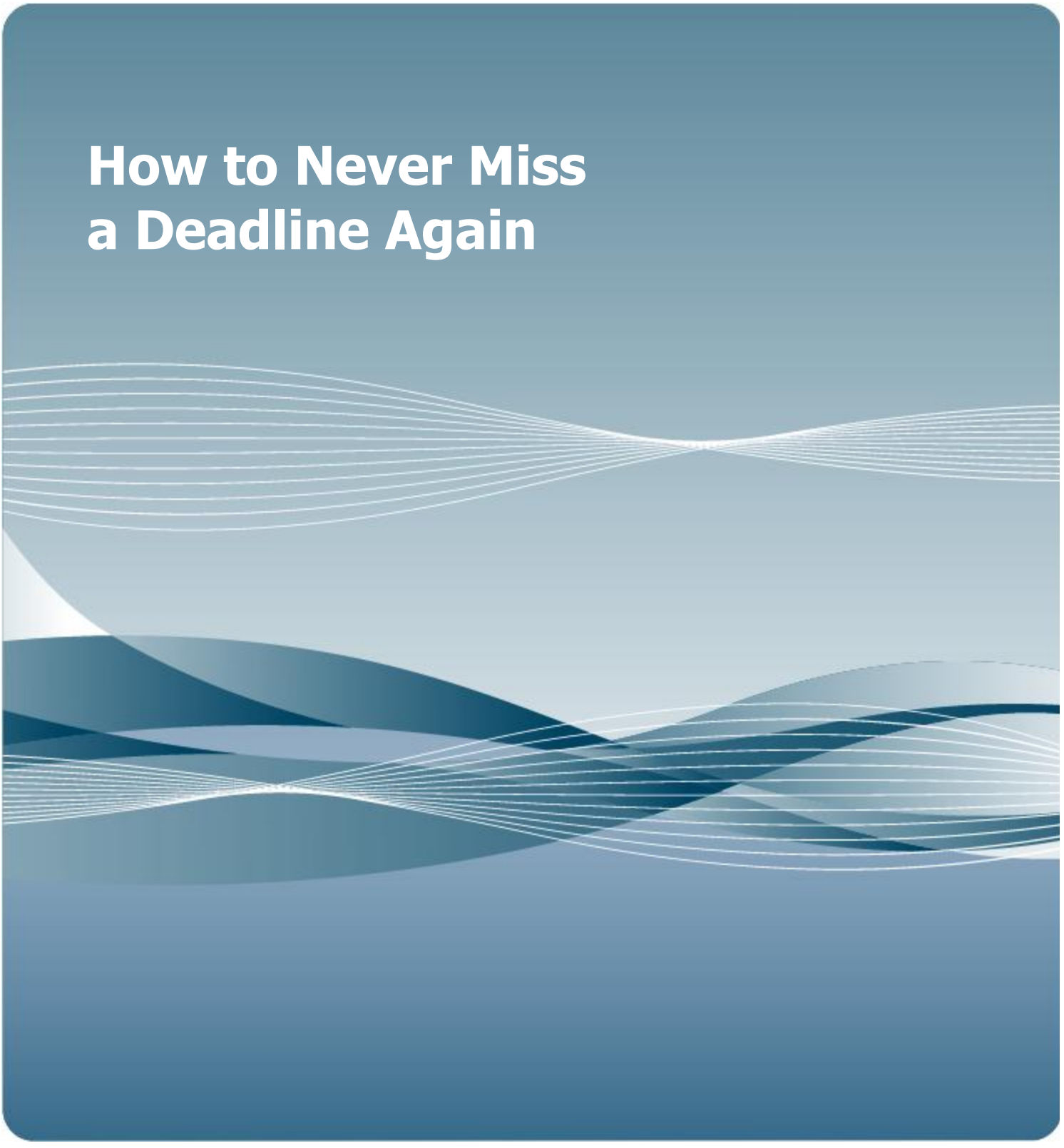
How to Never Miss a Deadline Again

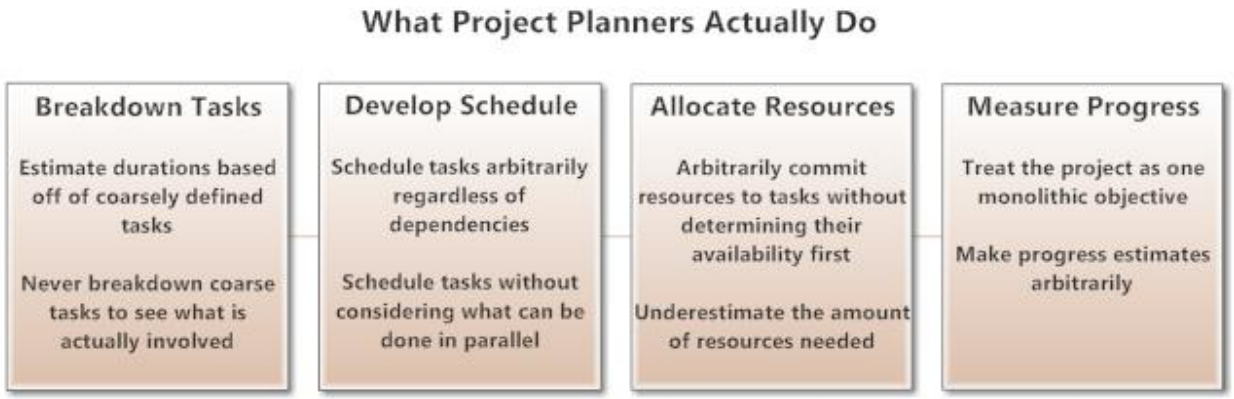


Why Projects are Late

Many projects are delivered late and over-budget. In some organizations people take it as a given that any decent-sized project will run late, as though preemptively lowering expectations eliminates the problem.

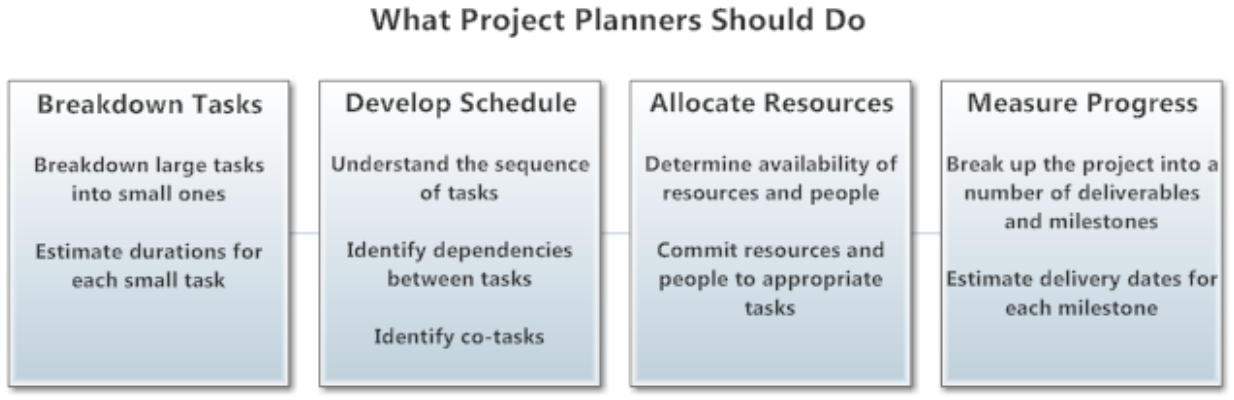
More often than not, a project is doomed to be late from conception because of the flawed assumptions and estimates of the people managing it. This is because the vast majority of people tasked with managing projects in their organizations don't have any successful method or process to rely upon. Many project managers simply "wing it" and that causes late projects.

The process incorporated into SmartDraw's solution is very effective when utilized properly. However, let's contrast what project planners should do with what project planners actually do:



The objective of this solution is to provide end-users with quick, easy-to-implement project planning and scheduling methodology, but it is missing some crucial steps.

Where project managers go wrong
Here's what an optimal project planning process looks like:



Here are some of the biggest problems with not planning and managing projects systematically:

Coarsely defined tasks lead to inaccurate deadlines

> Unsuccessful project managers plan projects by identifying a few broad, coarse tasks and arbitrarily produce an estimate based upon how long they think it takes. They do it this way because it's quick and easy, but the result is project timelines and estimates aren't realistic.

Failure to recognize dependencies between tasks results in delays

A dependent task is defined as "a task that depends on the output of another task." A dependent task cannot be started before the task it depends on is completed. For instance, if your project was a construction project, you can't order building materials without having the architects' blueprints and specifications. Failure to recognize these dependencies on the part of the project manager means that the project will inevitably be delayed.

Assuming unfettered access to resources results in delays

Most projects depend on shared resources. For a project manager to assume that he or she will have full access to those resources in the course of planning a project is wishful thinking at best. Inevitably, there will be times when project team members aren't available and when equipment is booked elsewhere, yet many project managers do not sufficiently account for these scenarios.

Estimating a project's progress based on "guts" and "intuition" leads to inaccurate deadlines

The failure to accurately define and track project milestones is another pitfall. Many project managers use only one milestone: the completion of the entire project. Milestones should be used to mark the prospective dates for when major objectives are met or delivered. If your project is to improve the efficiency of your customer service team then perhaps your first milestone is the date when the customer service operations team is able to answer 100% of all email inquiries within 24 hours.

The solution to all of these project planning and scheduling problems is to use a simple system that replaces off-the-cuff assumptions with facts and data.

How to Accurately Estimate a Project's Completion Date

Many projects are delivered late—one of the key reasons being that the tasks assigned to team members are too broad or vague.

A good example of a broad task is "design a new email campaign to sell a new product offering to existing customers." So, how long would it take a team to complete this task? Two days? Three days? Two weeks? Without digging into the specifics of what's involved, nobody can provide a truly sufficient answer. And that's where the trouble begins with most projects: the project manager doesn't decompose his or her project into small enough details in order to get a really clear idea of how long it will actually take.

Most projects are late largely because of these broad tasks, and the estimated timeline from inception to delivery is typically unrealistically short. Thus, the solution is to decompose these broad tasks into a number of smaller subtasks. It's easier to determine how long it will take you or your team to accomplish a smaller task as opposed to a larger one.

Consider these two groups of questions:

1. How long will it take you to develop and execute a new email marketing campaign to existing customers offering a new product in your company's line?
2. How long will it take you to do the following:
    a. Have your copywriter produce original copy for a single offer email
    b. Have your graphic designer develop a sleek layout for a single email
    c. Have your technical writer proofread a single email
    d. Have your web development team format a single email into HTML

Is it easier to provide comfortably specific answers for the first or second set of questions? Most honest people would say that it's almost impossible to give an accurate answer to the question, whereas it's much more feasible to provide some reasonable answers for the second group of questions. Thus if you actually had to build a project based off of these estimates, you could use the sum of all of the times required for each small task to determine how long it will take you and your team to accomplish a much larger task.

And that's where this project management process begins-by using mind maps to take a project and break down its tasks into smaller, more specific tasks which you can more easily estimate and roll up into a more accurate delivery deadline for the project as a whole.

In the subsequent project management steps in this process you will use your delivery estimates for these smaller, specific tasks help you to create more realistic, accurate project schedules and deliver your projects on time and on budget. Click here to watch a video on how do this with SmartDraw.

How to Set a Project Schedule

The first step in this project management process consisted of breaking down large tasks into a number of smaller tasks, estimating the completion dates of those smaller tasks, and rolling those tasks up into estimates for larger tasks until you have a set of estimates for the entire project.

The next step in the process is to actually determine the order in which these tasks are to be completed using a project chart. There are two things to bear in mind when determining the order of your project's tasks:

- **Dependent tasks** - tasks that depend on the outcome of other tasks are "dependent" tasks because they cannot be completed until the tasks upon which they depend are completed first. Project managers must account for these in their project schedule or prepare to face numerous delays.

Co-tasks - Tasks which don't use any overlapping or exclusive resources and don't have any outstanding dependencies, meaning either the dependencies have already been satisfied or there are none, can be co-tasks. Co-tasks are usually done in parallel with each other because it uses resources that are already available without requiring any extra time. Identify as many of these as possible.The video below will show you how to convert your mind map into a project chart and how to identify both co-tasks and dependent tasks in your project schedule. In subsequent steps in the process you will learn to schedule around resource contentions and how to set milestones so you can properly monitor your project's progress.

Click here to watch a video on how to do this with SmartDraw.

How to Measure a Project's Progress

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The final step in this project management process is to determine how to accurately measure the progress made on your project. It's one of the weakest areas for most project managers-how many times have you been in a meeting where someone was asked "how far are you along with project X?" and the answer was "Oh, uhhh, I'd say maybe 50%, 60% done." Answers like those are not definitive ones-they're guesses at best.

That's what's wrong with most progress measurement; most project managers rely on broad estimates rather than definitive answers.

There is a cure that will help project managers see clearly through the fog and it's called "milestones." A milestone is a well-defined, solid achievement that is met at some point through the course of a project. The word "milestone" takes its name from the placeholders used to indicate how far travelers had progressed along the roads built by the Romans; every time you passed a milestone, it was another indication that you were that much closer to reaching some destination.

The analogy accurately describes what project managers try to do: they want to define clear indicators that show how close they are to reaching their project's goals. Take a look at some sample milestones for a software engineering project:

- Milestone 1 - All of the design specifications and the design specification documents are complete.
- Milestone 2 - All members of the development team have individual assignments and set deadlines. Work on the software itself can begin.
- Milestone 3 - Data layer is complete. Testing is ongoing.
- Milestone 4 - Business layer is complete. Testing is ongoing.
- Milestone 5 - Presentation layer is complete. Testing is ongoing.
- Milestone 6 - All major errors and bugs are resolved. Minor bug fixing and testing is ongoing.
- Milestone 7 - Project ships.

Even though these milestones are broad, these are good milestones in that they are very definitive. For instance, the data layer is complete when all of the functionality defined for it in the project's requirements is fully implemented and tested for its correctness. A good, definitive milestone is one that every team member recognizes once it has been met. Compare this to the old approach, which is that a milestone has been met only when the project manager thinks it has been met.

The value of having these definitive milestones is thus: when asked "how far along are you on your project?" you can safely answer, "we've reached four of our seven milestones so progress is coming along smoothly; following the schedule set on our project chart, we expect to have reached our final milestone by mid-January."

Click here to watch a video on how to do this with SmartDraw.

This document describes one of the Visual Solutions that successful managers and companies use every day to be more effective, productive, and profitable.

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