How To Manage A Short-term Project (28)

Route Forums will need to plan, run and monitor projects all the time, since much of your success will be through arranging initiatives to showcase your members' services and products. A project may be a concerted publicity campaign for the route and its members, reaching into other parts of the province or even the whole country in search of new visitors to your route. Or the project may be to arrange for the route to take exhibition space at a travel show, to promote your area and what it has to offer.

There are many activities that the Open Africa Toolkit suggests and describes that can make your route more successful, but unless these are properly planned and managed, you will not achieve their full benefit.

This Guide gives you some advice about how to do this as effectively as you can, focusing on how to plan a project properly, manage your resources effectively, monitor the project as it develops, and learn from the experience for the next time. It will explain the basics of how to manage a project in a well-planned, orderly and effective way, so that it meets its objective and satisfies those involved, especially the route members.

Whatever the route must do, it needs to be organised properly. This means attention to detail, planning in advance, and ensuring that all resources (including money) used in the process are employed efficiently.

For more information, look at the Guides on how to develop a project idea and project budget. There is also a Guide on how to keep members involved in route projects.

Why project planning is important

As part of Open Africa, your route is also expected to be as professional and businesslike as possible, not just to be successful but to inspire the confidence of our customers and other stakeholders. Being good managers of all our projects and activities is an essential part of this aim.

What is a short-term project?

What exactly is a short-term project, and what are resources, stakeholders and deliverables? A short-term project is a task that usually lasts a matter of days or a few weeks. It has clear goals and objectives, it has a completion deadline, and there are fixed resources available to complete it.

Resources are the things you need to successfully complete a project. They include people, time, money, information, facilities, tools, material and equipment. Project stakeholders are those people who are directly involved in a project, including clients, a project manager, project team members, suppliers and contractors. A project deliverable is a specific outcome of the running of a project: it might be an object (such as a design, product, schedule or budget) or an action (such as an idea or plan).

The basics of managing a project

Managing a project is really about two things:

- Solving problems: even when you have planned a project really well, you will still need some problem-solving from time to time.
- Remembering all the details you must attend to: all projects are made up of many smaller activities, and the more complicated a project is, the more likely it is that you will forget some small detail.

When you plan and manage a project, try to write down in an organised way all the information you have about the project. For example:

- When you are thinking about finances, create a budget.
- When decisions are made in a meeting, write them down and send them to everyone who was there.
- When you decide who will do what, draw up a list of responsibilities.

Many things change from the start of a project to its end, so these documents won't always remain the same. When you need to answer questions about the project or forget an important detail, you will be glad to have a file of information to look at.

Keeping written records will also help you to plan and run the project. When projects get very big or complicated, trying to keep everything in your head will end up with information getting lost or important details being forgotten.

Step 1: Describing the project

Before you even begin planning a project, write a document that clearly describes the project. This document will be useful for the following reasons:

- Anyone involved in the project can quickly get a good idea of what it is all about.
- Before beginning, you can be sure that all stakeholders have the same vision of the project and are working towards the same goal.
- You can see more clearly what actions need to happen and when they must happen.
- Possible risks and problems can be picked up early.

The definition of the project should be short and simple, but it must be complete. Be sure that you clearly state what the goal of the project is and when the project must be completed.

The goal of the project is the final result you hope to achieve. Try to write this in one sentence, for example: "Brochure for X route including all member services. "

Now think about the following questions:

- Who are the project stakeholders? Make a list of everyone who will be involved, including who is putting up the money.
- What do stakeholders need from the project? It would be helpful for you to ask stakeholders directly to be sure. Make a list of what the project stakeholders expect, and organise the list according to importance.
- What are the project deliverables? Listing the deliverables should give you an idea of the different tasks that make up the project. Looking at the stakeholders' expectations may help you identify the project deliverables. Estimating delivery dates for the deliverables will give you the project schedule outline. Remember that these timeframes could change as planning goes on.
- What money is available to the project? What are the costs of running the project going to be? Put together a basic budget. A budget doesn't need to be very complex; a simple two-column budget (expenditure items and amounts) is often enough.
- Where will the work take place? Do you require specialist facilities, such as studios?
- What materials will you need? What tools will you need?
- What information do you need before you begin? Do you need to do any research?
- What problems, limits and risks might hold up the project? Think about these in terms of time, funding, human error, technical holdups, etc.

Step 2: Planning the project: Creating a schedule

The planning stage of running a project is very important. Projects seldom go exactly according to their plan, but good planning can help you prepare for the unexpected.

Planning involves looking at all the tasks that make up the project in a structured way. Planning helps you to:

- Schedule tasks.
- Allocate tasks to specific people.
- Monitor the progress of the project.
- Anticipate problems and solve them quickly.

The document you created when you defined the project will help you to plan the project. Look at the list of deliverables you created in Step 1. Write down every task linked to each deliverable. Now you should have a complete list of the actions that make up the project. Put these tasks in the order they should happen and make an estimate of how long each task will take to complete. Be careful to allow enough time for errors, especially for those things that have not been done before.

When you have completed this list, you should be able to create a fairly accurate schedule for the project. There are many different ways of putting together project schedules. If you know Microsoft Excel, or a similar programme for creating spreadsheets, the simplest schedule could have dates in a column down the right side of a page with the action listed next to the date. If you create this kind of schedule, you can list the name of the person responsible for the task on the right. Other scheduling tools and software are mentioned at the end of this article. Alternatively, you can use the Gantt Chart (available in the "How To Develop A Project Plan for a Short Term Project".

Now that you have a project schedule, you can allocate the tasks to members of your project team.

Step 3: Planning the project: Communication

Communication between team members, with the project leader and with stakeholders is extremely important to keep your project running smoothly. For this reason, it is a good idea to include a communication plan in the project plan. Stay in regular contact with members of your team; this will help you to monitor the progress of your project.

These are the questions you should answer when planning a communication strategy:

- What are the lines of communication? For example, who discusses the project with the client? Who do team members take queries and problems to?
- What information is freely available to all stakeholders and what information should be considered confidential?
- Who will be responsible for discussing the project with outsiders?

Two communication practices are useful to the running of a project: activity reports and progress meetings. While you are planning the project, decide:

- When you will need reports from teams or team members.
- What format you want the reports to take (for example, do you need the people responsible to present to you, or will an e-mailed document be enough?).
- How often do you need the project team to get together to discuss progress?
- What information must team members have on hand for progress meetings?

Activity reports and progress meetings will provide you or the project manager with early warning when problems might happen,

and give you the opportunity to quickly put together emergency plans if necessary.

Remember, however, that planning reports and meetings often can have the opposite effect to what you hope. Expecting your team to provide reports and come together for meetings too regularly can have the following results:

- Team members might feel that you don't trust them and they might lose motivation.
- Time might be wasted on monitoring that might be better spent carrying out the tasks.
- Team members may not have a sense of work being accomplished, and might begin to feel they haven't been productive.

Step 4: Making the project work

Once you begin the project, you will discover that it develops differently to how you expected. If you have laid good, solid plans and are confident in the structures you have put in place, you will be able to follow where the project leads without too much stress and panic. Keep in mind that project management is mostly about problem-solving and adopt a flexible attitude. A project manager who is confident and doesn't panic easily will keep team members focused and motivated.

A project is more likely to be successful if your project plan is carefully put together. Running the project without laying down the groundwork is a recipe for disaster. If you work according to your project plan, you should find that:

- Systems and processes are quickly and smoothly begun.
- Communication flows well, leading to better co-operation between team members.
- Work progresses well as a result of focused activity.

Once the project has begun, you must ensure that the correct,

most useful and most up-to-date information is given to team members and stakeholders. This is most important when changes are made to plans or schedules. You will find it useful to regularly review your schedule and budget, and include changes to either as soon as possible.

Step 5: Closing the project

Once the project has come to an end, you can take some time to ensure that you close the project well. Don't simply stop the project and move onto the next one. Take some time to do the following:

- Make time to celebrate the success of the project with team members.
- Make sure that all outstanding bills have been paid.
- Create a final budget that reflects the project's actual expenditure.
- Take some time to think about and discuss the project with team members. What lessons were learnt as a result of this project? Remember that the lessons of a project relate to the management of a project as well as the work done during the course of the project. If you feel it would be useful, ask your client and suppliers to join your team members in reviewing the project.
- Take care to file all the documents relating to the project, and archive project files if suitable.

Who is involved with project management

Depending on what the project is who is tasked with it, the route and its members will have to decide who is responsible for managing it and who else will need to be involved. It is always important that projects carried out by the route stem from the needs and wishes of the members; this way, there will be proper buy-in from members and the necessary contributions,

involvement and support will then be forthcoming.

There may also be other stakeholders in the route who are not directly involved in the project but are interested in it; the project managers should try and keep them informed or even get them involved if necessary, so that links of cooperation and sharing can be built.

If there is outside funding for the project — such as a donor, municipality or provincial agency — then they will need to be kept closely informed about the progress of the work.

How will the route deal with the management of projects?

Routes all have access to these main resources: the time and expertise of their administrators; the profile, experience and network of Open Africa; and the skills and insights of their members. These can all be put to good use when projects are planned, so that most projects can be carried out 'in-house'. This is a vital part of building the cooperative nature of the routes, and developing the skills of members to promote the local economy.

In those cases where specialised skills are required, a route may decide to involve an outside expert to carry out a project. This usually involves some extra cost, but this will be worth it if the project brings extra benefits to the route and its members.

Practical tips

- It is best to keep a project plan simple. If you don't understand your own system, it will be difficult to apply.
- If you are allocating tasks to other team members, remember to be specific about what is expected of them,

what date they should complete their tasks by, and how you will assess their work.

- If you are able to include your project team in the planning of your project, you might find they develop more enthusiasm for the task and may well have valuable insights.
- Remember that the project plan is not set in stone. As the project unfolds, you will need to adjust and adapt plans, re-allocate resources, revise budgets and make alternate plans when things go wrong. Trying to stick to a project plan when it has clearly become inadequate will just increase your stress, demotivate your team, and threaten the project's success.

Use of this Guide

This Guide can be used by another involved in route activities, including the members. Route committees may include people who have not done any formal project management before; most of them will be people who get things done in their own way.

Unfortunately, many people find it difficult to work in close collaboration with others; entrepreneurs especially often find it easier just to do things themselves. The advice in this Guide will help those people to work more cooperatively with fellow members and other stakeholders, which is essential for building the organisation.

If more training is necessary, there are plenty of training courses — some lasting only a day or two — that can offer more expertise in project management. These are offered by universities, colleges and commercial training companies.

Other Guides

There are other Guides to help routes to run successful

projects; these include:

- Guide: [How To Develop A Project Idea](#)
- Guide: [How To Develop A Project Plan For Short-term Projects](#)
- Guide: [How To Develop A Project Budget](#)

Other resources

Microsoft Office Project is project management software that is available in the Microsoft Office Professional package, or can be purchased separately. Project provides you with tools to help you with scheduling projects and managing budgets, as well as effectively presenting information. For trial versions of and other information on Microsoft Project, go to http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/project-help/

Project Management for Dummies by Stanley E Portny (2006, ISBN: 9780470049235).

Mind Tools has a good introduction to project planning and offers some useful project planning tools at www.mindtools.com

Vertex42 offers free project management templates for Microsoft Excel, including a Gantt chart template at www.vertex42.com

The School of Project Management (www.spm.co.za) has been operating in South Africa since 1986.