



Scope Creep

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One of the most insidious problems in any kind of project work is scope creep. The impact of scope creep is often a dissatisfied customer or a loss of profit for the vendor or both. Either way, the situation has caused the result to be less satisfying than what was envisioned.

It is very easy to understand how scope creep happens. No complex project can be fully described in every minute detail before doing the work. There are always going to be surprises that come up along the way in terms of unexpected delays, schemes that did not work as expected, resources being unavailable, new features requested by the customer, and a host of other changes in the description of the project. This phenomenon should be understood by both parties ahead of time and not come as a surprise.

There is no 100% guarantee that any project is going to be completed without some change in scope. The trick to manage scope creep effectively is to recognize when a change is being suggested. It is very easy to accommodate small or subtle changes in the specification for the project, and yet the sum of many small changes can mean a huge difference in the success of the project.

Make sure all changes to the specification are openly discussed. That will protect you at least partially, because it will notify the customer that a change from the original design has been requested. You can then renegotiate the price or the delivery time in order to accommodate the change in scope.

If you are the customer, recognize that the vendor was not able to envision 100% of the things that needed to be done to deliver your project. In reality, changes in scope will be happening for both the vendor and the customer on every project. Life happens, and both parties are going to have to roll with the vicissitudes that are being faced on a daily basis.

Here are eight tips that can help reduce the stress of scope creep:

1. Ensure there is enough communication with the customer when creating the specifications.
2. Do not go into the project with preconceived notions of what the customer really wants.
3. Make sure specifications are detailed and specific, because any vague deliverables are going to be areas of contention down the road.
4. Factor in the potential for scope creep by building contingencies or safety factors into the bidding process.
5. Keep a ledger of requested changes on both sides. It is not necessary to renegotiate the entire deal for each change, but it is important to have all changes documented.
6. Plan the job in phases with sign off gates at specific milestones. If there is a scope change it can be confined to one phase of the project and not infect the entire effort.
7. Look for win-win solutions to problems. Often a creative solution is available that will delight both the vendor and the customer.
8. Avoid rigidity about the job. Make sure the entire project is constantly moving in the direction of a successful conclusion. If things get significantly off the track, call for a meeting to clarify the issues and brainstorm solutions together.
9. Keep the customer well informed about progress of the project.
10. Express gratitude when the other party is willing to make a concession. Good will is important in every project because life is a series of projects, and a poor reputation can severely hamper future income.
11. Have a formal closing to the project where each party expresses gratitude for a job well done. If there were any specific lessons learned during this job, make sure they are documented so both parties can benefit by them in the future.
12. Plan an appropriate celebration at the end of a challenging project to let people feel good about what they have done and reduce the pressure.

The best defense for stress caused by scope creep is to bring all changes out in the open. Changes can occur on either side of the equation, but they need to be made visible and the impact on the total delivery whether it be the specification or the time or cost to make it happen need to be understood along the way. The key objective is to avoid disappointing surprises that result from lack of communication between various stakeholders throughout the process.

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