

# Grating Expectations

No matter how good the outcome, if customers expected something different, the project is a failure.

By Alan S. Horowitz

**T**HE IT PROJECT WAS A SUCCESS. It was on time and on budget, and it did what it was supposed to. The only problem: The customer wasn't happy. The project manager had provided written weekly status reports, just as the customer had requested, but he had missed the crucial second step: asking for feedback. The project manager learned too late that you can never assume you know what a customer is thinking — you have to ask. Because he failed to do that, the customer was resentful, says Naomi Karten, a principal at Randolph, Mass.-based training and consulting firm Karten Associates. "The information [the customer] was given didn't mesh with what he was looking for, [but] he didn't take any steps to ask for what he really wanted," she observes.

Welcome to a world where even successful IT projects can be deemed failures if the customer expected something other than what IT delivered. To survive and prosper, you have to learn how to manage what customers expect.

First, it's important to understand how skewed expectations arise. "Unreasonable expectations almost always come from a misunderstanding," says Dan Bent, director of claims technology at The Nyhart Co., a financial services firm in Indianapolis.

The sources of these misunderstandings are varied. Some are based on incorrect assumptions. "The expectation is that IT is like the power company," says Garrett Granger, CIO of office supply manufacturer Dixon Ticonderoga Co. in Heathrow, Fla. "[Users] expect the lights to go on," he says, "and the only time you hear from them is when the lights don't go on."

History often raises false expectations, says Rick Giese, e-commerce development manager at Great Lakes Educational Loan Services Inc. in Madison,

Wis. If a previous project didn't go well, the customer's expectations may be negative, he says, and no matter how well IT performs, it may not be able to overcome them.

A directive from the top can create expectations that IT will have trouble meeting, says Nate Root, an analyst at Forrester Research Inc. Consider the sales executive who decrees that his department needs a new system to track customers. Because the executive thinks he knows what's needed, he does no research, nor does he want IT to spend the time and money to develop good user requirements. IT is left having to fulfill expectations that have never really been vetted.

Sometimes customers aren't sure what they expect. Especially with a large project that takes time to complete, expectations may evolve. "The technology doesn't change as quickly as people's minds change," says Karten.

Unattainable expectations may arise from outside the company, says Anita Leto, director of IT transformation at consulting firm Ouellette & Associates Inc. in Bedford, N.H. The news media publish articles, vendors place ads, and trade shows provide rosy pic-

## Don't Overdeliver

Developers like to add features to what they're developing. "Gold plating" is what Rick Giese calls it. Beware of this, warns the e-commerce development manager at Great Lakes Educational Loan Services.

For one thing, customers don't like surprises, even so-called good ones. And while you might assume that what you are giving the customer is desirable, it may actually be a turn-off.

Moreover, exceeding expectations can have a snowball effect, according to Naomi Karten, principal at consulting firm Karten Associates. You run the risk of creating unreasonable expectations over the long term.

"Customers expect what they are now receiving, and in a sense, they keep upping the ante," she says. "Your good intentions can become a potential pitfall."

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tures, all of which can foster unrealistic expectations. Customers expect plug and play. "That's what the vendors at the conferences promise them," she says.

Finally, IT's own expectations may be as off-target as those of users. The IT group may think that if it tells customers about a new application, they'll be eager to use it. But unless it obviously makes their jobs easier, customers may ignore it. "The average IT end user and the average IT producer have different expectations," Root says.

But you can manage expectations. Here's how:

**Communicate carefully.** Karten notes that it's often not the work that IT does that riles customers; it's the customers' interaction with IT. So use unambiguous language. If the help desk commits to "respond" to a customer communication within four hours, the customer may think this means IT will solve the problem within four hours. But IT may think this means it will acknowledge a problem within four hours. "Both parties need the same understanding of what 'respond' means," Karten says.

**Take the time to do it right.** "The customer needs to be assisted in finding a reasonable set of expectations," says Douglas C. Gilbert, director of Verizon Communications Inc.'s operations for the U.S. Department of Energy. If IT doesn't take the time early on to help the customer understand what's reasonable and unreasonable, he says, don't be surprised when expectations turn out to be beyond IT's capabilities.

**Don't be a patsy.** Push back against unrealistic directives from on high, says Root. Don't start the project until you know exactly what users really need.

**If you're fighting negative expectations, try to build trust,** says Virginia Robbins, managing director of IT and operations at Chela Education Financing in San Francisco and a *Computerworld* columnist. That's done through working closely with business customers to set priorities, requirements and scope.

**Keep expectations in sync** by holding regular meetings in which senior IT and business executives hear project status reports from workers. "These appear to be time-consuming," says Ellen Gottesdiener, principal consultant at EBG Consulting in Carmel, Ind., "but they save time by dealing with things upfront."

**Stay current,** warns Giese. Hold meetings at least weekly, if not more frequently. "If you're a week off in expectations, it's easier to get things righted than if you're two months off and the client says, 'This isn't at all what I thought it would be,'" he says.

**Use pilot programs as a reality check,** Gilbert says. "The pilot is set up as a joint program between business and IT," he explains. A joint management committee sets scope, goals and metrics for the pilot, monitors it and verifies the results. "We use the pilot to collect data on which we can base realistic expectations," he says.

**Don't sugarcoat it.** "One area where IT doesn't do as good a job as it could is in communicating how long a project will take," says Giese. If the job can't be done within the time the customer wants, say so upfront.

If customers' expectations aren't realistic, communicate that to them, says Ann Smith, vice president of federal sales at Tumbleweed Communications Corp. in Redwood City, Calif. "It won't get better," she says, "so deal with it as soon as possible." **Q56059**