



Accelerating Success

The Project Assassin

Proven Techniques for Glorious Failure:

#1 Spread Belief in Miracles!

**Disclaimer: Avalion Consulting does not endorse or condone the tactics of the Project Assassin – he is DANGEROUS! He and his minions have destroyed countless projects, careers and companies. However, this multi-part study of his techniques may prevent the uncontrolled spread of troubled or failed projects.*



A poorly planned project takes three times as long as estimated while a well planned project takes only takes twice as long. – Murphy's Law

In this series of articles, I, the Project Assassin, will guide you through Project Management approaches that are commonly used, yet contain remarkable powers of destruction and waste. <evil laugh> By honing the techniques in my Project Assassin series, you too can become a Black Belt Assassin and destroy virtually any project you choose. When in doubt, “Everybody Else Does It” may be just the rationale that embeds these ideas in your company too. Read carefully to learn the ways of the assassin.

Let's start with a technique so fatal that it marks a project for death before it is launched... so deceptive that it is greeted with cheers instead of fears. My weapon is **Unbridled Optimism**. You see, projects are often launched with great emotion, with fanfare, with high visibility... sometimes they have already been to the Boardroom. Projects that have an unquestioned mandate are the easiest targets for the assassin's attack – it is no longer politically correct for anyone to ask tough, challenging questions. Preliminary project planning is only completed by the last real mystics – predicting and planning amazing feats at a high level throughout the project with no real detail to refute. I'm confident they use the same hallucinogenics as the ancient priestesses at Delphi.

The secret of my “success,” you ask? It’s simple--the triumph of hope over experience that pervades IT project planning. Flawed assumptions, key tools of the Project Assassin, which will derail projects include:

- ***Set Milestones and Assume Miracles:*** I persuade Project Sponsors that nothing ever changes without “stretch goals and bold assumptions” and that the project team will just sandbag if not aggressively pushed. Furthermore, I insist on making the following high level decisions independent of one another: 1) project scope, 2) completion date, 3) resources and 4) budget.

Select the biggest scope simply because it inspires awe, the date based on “when you want it” and the resources and budget based on “funding harder to access than Fort Knox gold.” NEVER attempt to actually reconcile these decisions. Rather, simply insist that they are in alignment.

Analogously, this is like saying, “I want a new 5,000 square foot custom home in Highland Park, I need it built in three months (including tear down), and I have \$120,000 budgeted with one part-time carpenter.” Finally, assume that the Project Manager can work out the details and make it all fit (this is the essential “Miracle” part.) There’s no need to be patient; your project will fail more quickly than you can possibly imagine.

- ***Assume Spontaneous Consensus:*** I always plan that the tough business design decisions will be made very quickly (this NEVER happens). Further, I plan that a single facilitated session will resolve debates which have been raging for months or years (this NEVER happens either). I push all tough design decisions to the future to be “resolved later.”

Most of all – I resurrect and revisit the same decision repeatedly and rehash the debate; imagine the resources that can be consumed and the heightened frustration created by churning on the SAME issue again and again (and again). These techniques help maximize the spending and waste before failure becomes obvious. When executed properly, this technique alone has even helped me kill future projects based on the horrible experience with the current project. The organization loses the stomach for big projects altogether.

Assume that decisions will fall into place with “spontaneous consensus” just because there is a deadline. Your projects will surely die an agonizing death, just like mine.

- **Assume Instant Perfection:** I just love pretending that everything will be right the first time. I tell the Business Sponsor that testing, reviews and planning for rework just demonstrates a lack of competence or confidence and cannot be tolerated. I say that contingency time is just a way to create lazy slack.

I push to: 1) Expect a perfect design on the first draft with no revisions. 2) Plan to build bug-free code and perfect configurations (hey, it could happen). 3) Assume that the legacy data is highly accurate and needs no translation or cleansing. 4) The clincher – think of testing as “just a formality” with no time needed to fix defects and retest.

Assume that everything will go right the first time. Your project will most certainly collapse under its own weight.

- **Assume Change Will Be Embraced.** This one is elegant – push for an assumption that people will simply adopt change readily “because it’s their job and we told them to be open and flexible.”

Have you ever installed new software and had the impacted employees redesign their business processes, restructure their organization, define new roles and train themselves, and stay motivated with no additional planning or assistance? Neither have I. <another evil laugh>

Even the best solutions can still be derailed by ignoring the people issues. Assume that people readily change with little resistance. Even if the other obstacles are overcome, poor change readiness is a great weapon and has slain many projects.

The techniques in this article are time tested and proven; the faulty assumptions that drive my projects into the ground are self-evident. Why do organizations repeat the same mistakes? Unbridled Optimism!

I leave you with this parting thought...

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” – Alternately attributed to Francis Bacon, Benjamin Franklin and Albert Einstein (must’ve been some smart guy that said it)

Avalion Tip: If many of your company’s projects are late, over-budget or under-scoped, take a look at the project estimating process and assumptions. Are they aligned? Are they updated based on actual experience with other projects?

Avalion Tip: If indecision has pervaded past projects, identify the most contentious issues up front, resolve them early in your plan, and set aside a realistic amount of time for analysis and decision making.

Avalion Tip: Salvador Dali may have said it best, “Have no fear of perfection, you’ll never reach it.” To meet your project goals, expect “unexpected surprises” (since expected surprises are an oxymoron) and plan for contingency time, resources, and budget. Scale the contingency based on past experience, project ambiguity and complexity.

Avalion Tip: In many IT projects, the design of “silicon-based systems” are easier to alter than the behavior of the “carbon-based units.” The project plan must include communications, listening, organizational planning, and training. Don’t shortchange in this area – you’ll pay for it later. Oh yeah – include it in the schedule and budget.

About the Author: While the identity and whereabouts of the Project Assassin remain unknown, Kevin Christ, Vice President of IT Services with Avalion Consulting, has spent his career battling the Project Assassin and his forces in program management, project management, and troubled project turnarounds. He is known for his business acumen, his technical insight, and a troubling sense of humor. Kevin has been a management consultant for almost 25 years and his full profile can be found at www.linkedin.com/in/kchrist. He can be e-mailed at kchrist@avalion.com.