

Ten Steps to Building an ECM System

Effective project management is crucial to any successful IT initiative, ECM included.

By Steve Kass

Whether you are implementing a new ECM system, converting an old or departmental one to a new or enterprise installation, or converting a backfile, you will be managing a project in that process. This article will discuss the common steps and stages of managing that project.

According to the Project Management Institute (PMI), there are five standard stages relevant to project management. They are initiating, planning, executing, controlling, and closing the project. Within them are many techniques and steps that are specified, but no matter which type of project you are managing, these steps can be applied. Here are ten steps you can apply to ECM projects. This process works!

Depending upon the size, scope, and budget, you may use more or fewer of these elements. Guided by these ten steps, you will follow the correct path and the essential elements of creating an ECM system. Also, depending upon your organization's policies and customs, templates, forms, or styles may be used that will dictate the shape of the project ingredients.

You may be the initiator of the project, you may be named the manager by another individual, or you may be called in at some point during its progress. Whatever the case, you will need to know these basic steps that will take you from the beginning ideas about a project through to completion. If you join after the beginning, you can pick up at the appropriate place,

or even use these elements to complete the formality of the project documentation.

1. PROPOSING AN ECM SYSTEM

If you are involved from the beginning, the first thing to do is develop a project proposal. This precedes the initiation phase because until the proposal is accepted or approved there is no project. Your objective is to make an initial case for your management to justify the expense, time, and resources to pursue this project. Once the green light is given, you will initiate a project.

It is in this document that your strategy begins to take shape. You will want to sketch out the idea for the initiative by beginning with its need, and the problem it is intended to solve. It may be for one application in a single department, or an enterprise platform encompassing documents, email, and workflow (obviously, the larger the scope, the larger the proposal). Talk about the scope in general, high-level terms, and include a few paragraphs about potential cost, time to implement, and what kind of resources it will take to complete. If you can generate an estimated ROI, include it.

2. ECM SYSTEM PROJECT CHARTER

Once a project has been given the green light, it is time to prepare a project charter. This is the document that gives the project and the project manager formal authority. It is signed by the sponsor(s) and states the terms of the initiative. It is also where the concepts

and ideas are formulated for the scope, the requirements, the statement of work (SOW), and the project plan. By this time, it is important that you have identified at least one sponsor, and your potential stakeholders. Name them and their roles here, along with a descriptive project title for reference throughout the organization.

Begin to describe the problem as it exists today and then how this initiative is intended to remedy it. Try to keep this statement in business terms with the technology terms kept to a minimum. There will be plenty of time to spend on technical documents in later phases of the project. Once the problem is clear, state the goals and objectives for the project. Be sure to talk about the benefits to the stakeholder's departments and your entire organization as well.

Include your name as project manager. Your authority will flow from this document and those who sign it. It's an important ingredient in the success of the project.

Fully describe the scope of the initiative at a high level including all of the major features. Be sure to state what is NOT included as well. (We'll want to avoid scope creep, and here is where your basis for controlling scope begins.) As with most major documents, circulate and solicit feedback from stakeholders and sponsors so that you are all in agreement and there will be few surprises. You need everyone's support to succeed.

3. ECM SYSTEM SCOPE

The important scope document serves to define the project in some detail. With the objectives stated in the charter, you will begin to lay out the project in terms of the deliverables. You must try to include everything in this document that is to be accomplished in this project. This goes deeper than the high-level or overview. In fact, give a summary in the beginning of the scope. It does not necessarily need to contain detailed technical information, but does need to describe the technology architecture and topology, if that is relevant to the project. Also, recap all the charter information in this document for reference. It's OK to even use the same words...if it works in the charter, it will work here.

Be certain to cover all of the features and functions that will be included. This document becomes one of the fundamental building blocks for the entire project

plan, so it is good to put some work into this to get it right and complete. Also, be careful to progress logically from goals and objectives to solutions that are aligned with them. As with the prior step, say what is not included for clarity purposes. A statement of resources required along with budget, time, people, and systems would complete this document.

Even if you are doing this entirely in-house, you need to have a tight statement of work to act as the basis of understanding between you, the eventual users (owners), and those who will build and implement it (the technologists).

4. ECM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

The scope document will give you guidance on how to proceed to gather requirements. It is a relatively straightforward approach in that the scope states the problem and deliverables...the requirements represent the information you'll need to fulfill those deliverables. If the project addresses an enterprise need, you will need to meet with each department and determine how they will benefit from your efforts and what they require in the solution. If you are developing something for a specific business unit, then focus on their needs. You will also need to interview and develop questionnaires for the other stakeholders: legal, finance, audit, regulatory compliance, technology, or any other involved entity.

Your role is to guide and be the subject matter expert, leading them into an understanding of the possibilities of the new system. In ECM systems, users always need guidance on indexing and metadata. Capture in all aspects will usually be a part of this. In the end, it is their business need that your project will have to satisfy, so be certain to understand what they need to accomplish, and what their hot buttons are.

5. ECM SYSTEM ROI ANALYSIS

While this may be a part of any of several other documents, the step of calculating a return on investment (ROI) is something that management nearly always

expects. In some cases, a compelling ROI is the only way to get approval for a project. There may be many reasons an organization wishes to do something (business advantage, efficiency, expansion, competition), but most of the time it ties back to an ROI...saving or making more money.

Also known as a cost/benefit analysis, an ROI may be hard (saving money on hardware or cutting steps out of a process to make more profit) or soft (improving customer service or improving brand image). Use a spreadsheet and calculate all of your costs and savings in detail. This is the essence of an ROI: a simple matter of having more savings than cost. Look at this over time (including cost of maintenance) and if you have a positive picture, then you have a solid ROI.

The RFP will place vendors on an equal playing field and make evaluation (your next step) easier as it will keep a structure and commonality to the bids. You can require bidders to follow your format.

6. ECM SYSTEM STATEMENT OF WORK

The statement of work (SOW) is one of the most crucial documents in your process. Taken mostly from the requirements and the scope, this serves to identify exactly what has to be delivered. Since it is common to utilize outside services for a system implementation or custom development, this spells out what is to be done. It is an integral part of the contract you will have with the vendor, so it is most important to have precisely what you do (or do not). This will cost you (your firm) money. Even if you are doing this entirely in-house, you need to have a tight SOW to act as the basis of understanding between you, the eventual users (owners), and those who will build and implement it (the technologists).

If it's capture, outline the specs; if it's conversion, state the deliverable in detail; if it's workflow, describe it in detail as well. Include all terms, service level agreements (SLAs), timing, milestones, quality, testing criteria, and acceptance criteria. Be as thorough as you can. Additionally, include assump-

tion, limitations, and risks to the extent that you can identify them at this point.

7. ECM SYSTEM PROJECT PLAN

Entire series of books have been written about project plans, but we'll stick to the essentials. A project plan needs to contain (depending upon the size and scope of the initiative) from dozens up to hundreds, and even in some cases, a thousand or more lines of detailed tasks that must be performed in order to complete a project.

Each task line will generally include a start and finish date, a duration of how long the task is expected to take (actual person days), the assigned resource either by name or role, a percentage complete, and a dependency such as "cannot start before task #x is complete." Project plans can be quite complex with far more information than this, but these are the basics and are very important.

Plans usually have milestones which may be "pilot delivered," or "phase I complete," or "unit testing complete." Milestones are a good way for progress to be measured and major accomplishments to be communicated, and keep focus and enthusiasm on your project.

Although not part of the project plan, these are other components:

- Communications plan – used to outline the methods, frequency, and recipients of regular communications about the project.
- Risk assessment and plan – used to identify, evaluate, track, and mitigate potential risks associated with the project.
- Team roster and contacts sheet – used to list the members of the various teams associated with the project, and provide their complete contact information (also included is their role in the project, and what constituency they represent).
- Roles and responsibilities – outlines each member of each team, and all ancillary participants (for example, you may need a specialist to participate one day to hook up a special device). This identifies every member and provides information about them.

In particular, larger projects may have additional elements such as quality tracking, budget tracking, and any other specialty that may pertain to the project. There is no hard and fast rule, and many of these depend upon your organization or management's customs.

8. ECM SYSTEM RFP

The request for proposal (RFP) is surely one of the most common ways to formalize the procurement of an ECM system or services. Many organizations already have RFP templates you can use as a guide for your project, but whether you re-use a form or create a new one, they must contain some common elements. You must fully describe the objectives, goals, business and technical requirements, background, architecture, company information, contract and legal requirements, dates and rules for bid submission, and deliverables of the project. A thorough job here demonstrates commitment to the vendor, and you want commitment in return. If you have followed this process from the beginning, you have much of this information (and even text) that can be adapted to this purpose.

The RFP will place vendors on an equal playing field and make evaluation (your next step) easier as it will keep a structure and commonality to the bids. You can require bidders to follow your format.

9. ECM SYSTEM RFP EVALUATION

If your bidders have followed your format, it can still be a tremendous effort to evaluate what they have said. It will be your responsibility first to determine that, at a high level, the vendor and the bid are qualified by your own standards.

In most cases, products and approaches can vary, sometimes widely, and comparing and assessing them can be complex. Many organizations use consultants to evaluate and prepare comparative tables for the most complex RFPs, but you can certainly do this with your own resources. Large documents can be parsed and delegated to team members, and smaller ones can be done by you or a single individual.

To be fair, you must assign a rating system for each criterion and treat this like a giant tally board, scoring each line item with a value. Add comments on subjective submissions and note exceptions. The evaluation team and your presentation to management will address these items, and make decisions based on the raw numbers and the subjective issues.

After this process, you may utilize demos, reference checking, interviews, "best and final" offers (BAFO), negotiations, and any other procedure or technique you wish to complete the evaluation. Make your recommendation and eventually proceed to contract.

10. EXECUTING AND CONTROLLING THE ECM PROJECT

You will utilize your project plan to execute and control your project. You will use your communications plan elements to keep everyone informed and get their feedback. You will receive and prepare various reports on status, milestones, issues, risk, quality, testing, and more. You will also handle everything that comes along while being agile enough to accept and deal with change. (Change is a constant. Don't let it throw you. Just document it, get approval, and move on.)

Be sure to collect and publish all documentation as you go along including your meeting minutes. When you are complete, get sign-offs and keep them, and write a lessons learned document to help those who follow.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As stated in the beginning of this piece, this process works. Take the time to understand a little more about it with research, reading, and discussions with your peers and it will serve you well. The structure itself helps you to be better organized, remember more of the details, and do a more thorough job. Add to that your expertise as a subject matter expert in ECM and you are on your way to a successful project. Good luck!

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