

Scope Creeping

"Scope is the set of stuff we've agreed to deliver." It's a charter issue, not a requirements issue.

What is Scope Creep?

The first phase in many project methodologies is to define the scope of the project. The scope states what the objectives of the project are and what work will be done to accomplish the project. The scope describes the parameters for what is included in a project and what is excluded from a project. The scope will become more refined as a project progresses, but it will always remain within the initial parameters defined.

When through the evolution of a project, the direction of a project changes where it goes outside the initial parameters—this is a change in the scope of the project. Scope changes can make a project larger or smaller. Scope changes can affect the timeline of the project and the cost of the project. The term scope creep more commonly refers these changes in scope. In a nutshell, scope creep is the change or growth of project scope.

Why Scope Creep?

There are many different causes for why scope creep can occur.

1. Scope creep can be viewed as the pressure to deliver more than what was agreed to originally.
2. Scope creep can also occur when the business requirements were not well defined and thus the scope changes over the course of the project as requirements are solidified.
3. Requirements may have not been well defined up front if the correct people were not involved in the definition of requirements.
4. Sometimes users do not know what they want at all in the beginning.
5. Some changes in scope are caused by external entities to the organization. Changes in items such as legislation, regulatory changes, market conditions, or in the technologies being utilized can cause scope creep.

How to manage Scope Creep?

Scope Creep more frequently occurs during the later stages of a project, such as programming and testing, than during the earlier stages, such as design. Changes may happen in the later stages as the project team gains more knowledge of the problem and solution. A project manager often tries to manage scope creep. The goal in managing scope creep is to try to minimize the impact of any changes on the project, such as on the timeline and cost. Many company methodologies have change control processes for managing scope creep. These change control processes often include filling out forms describing the requested change in scope and an approval process. This form is a good method to raise awareness of the project stakeholders to what the change is and what the implications of the change are, such as an increase in the timeline and an increased cost.

Prototyping can be a useful tool to work with the client upfront in the requirements phase to define what the client wants before it is built. Going through a number of iterations of the prototype with the client and changing scope at that point can help better define the final product that is needed and better result in project success. This is again when scope creep can be a good thing. The goal is for rework to not be needed when the final product is delivered.

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For consulting companies especially, scope change can be seen as a new opportunity to provide additional services. For the consulting company that will earn additional revenue as a result of being able to provide additional services, this can be a very good thing. To completely prevent any scope creep at all is a very difficult, and near impossible, task.

Most project managers strive to minimize the amount and extent of scope creep. The best way to minimize scope creep is to define the requirements up front as thoroughly as possible. Utilize different techniques such as prototyping and joint application development (JAD) sessions, to thoroughly explore and define the business and technical requirements.

The following steps for managing the scope creep process are:

1. Define and prioritize both requirements and deliverables, along with the associated risks. Have project stakeholders approve these items in writing. In addition to the normal benefits these items provide in laying down a good plan for the project, this information can be later utilized if requirements have to be weighed against each other for inclusion or exclusion if the scope changes.
2. Have a scope change process, which can include the following.
 - A form to document the requested changes in writing can be completed.
 - An analysis of the impact and cost-benefits can be conducted.
 - A review process with the project stakeholders can be held on the requested changes and the associated impacts (Such as additional resources required, affects on timelines, additional costs).
3. All scope changes should be approved in writing.
4. Schedule the approved changes into the project.
5. Perform constant internal review to make sure the project is on track and within scope.
6. When initially estimating or budgeting the project, put in a 10% to 20% cost contingency allowance.

Start a list of enhancements for subsequent releases while still in development on the initial release. This will be for items that are determined are out of the scope of this project.

One should work toward managing scope creep instead of preventing it. As discussed above, in some cases scope creep can be good and in others it can be bad. But the need to deal with it, to effectively manages it.