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A SOLUTION BUILDERS PLAYBOOK
2026 EDITION

A PLAYBOOK FOR LEADERS WHO OWN TECHNOLOGY PROJECTS

The IT Project Success Playbook.

The five reasons projects stall, a scoping method that kills surprises, the real math on in house versus on demand expertise, and a go live checklist.

INSIDE THE PLAYBOOK

01 Why projects stall

02 Scoping without surprises

03 In house vs. on demand

04 The go live checklist

Published by Solution Builders
Bloomington, Minnesota · www.solutionbuilders.com

30+	Top 1%	98%
YEARS	OF MSPS	CSAT

WHAT'S INSIDE

Built for projects that have to land the first time.

Technology projects rarely fail loudly. They slip a month, then a quarter, then quietly become "phase two." The difference between a project that lands and one that lingers is rarely the technology. It is ownership, scope, staffing and the two weeks around go live. This playbook covers all four.

01 The five reasons IT projects stall.
Unclear ownership, scope creep, dependency surprises, part time teams and vendor handoffs. How each one starts, and the early warning you can catch a month out.
PAGE 03

02 How to scope so there are no surprises.
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03 In house vs. on demand expertise.
The real cost of pulling your best engineer onto a six month project, what a six week specialist changes, and how to keep the knowledge when they leave.
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04 A checklist for a clean go live.
Acceptance criteria, a rollback plan, communications, hypercare and documentation. The two weeks around cutover decide whether anyone remembers the project fondly.
PAGE 12

WHO IT IS FOR
Owners, COOs, CFOs and IT leaders at companies with 25 to 500 people who sponsor, fund or run technology projects.

HOW TO USE IT
Read chapter 01 before you approve the next project. Chapters 02 and 04 are working documents to use with your team.

READING TIME
About 25 minutes cover to cover. The change request form in chapter 02 and the go live checklist in chapter 04 are built to reuse.

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01

The five reasons IT projects stall.

Technology projects almost never fail because the technology did not work. They fail because nobody owned the decision, the scope grew, a dependency surprised everyone in week six, the team had a day job, or three vendors each assumed another one was handling it. Here are all five.

11.4%
of project investment wasted through poor project performance

52%
of projects experience scope creep, up from 43% five years earlier

45%
average budget overrun on large IT projects, which also deliver 56% less value than planned

1 in 6
IT projects becomes a black swan with a 200% cost overrun

Projects do not fail at the end. They stall in the middle.

A stalled project still has a budget, a team and a weekly status meeting. What it no longer has is momentum. Each of the five patterns below shows up early, usually between weeks four and eight, and each one has a specific owner who can fix it.

01 **Unclear ownership**

Three people can say no and nobody can say yes. Decisions wait for a meeting, the meeting waits for a calendar, and the schedule quietly absorbs the delay.

02 **Scope creep**

Every "while we are in there" adds a week. Without written change control, the project you approved and the project being built drift a little further apart every sprint.

03 **Dependency surprises**

The new system needs a firewall rule, a license true up, a data cleanup or a vendor API nobody checked. Each one surfaces exactly when it blocks the critical path.

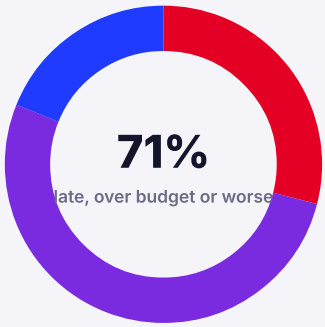
04 **Part time project teams**

Your best engineer owns the project and the help desk queue. The queue always wins, because the queue is loud and the project is patient.

05 **Vendor handoffs**

The software vendor, the carrier and your IT partner each deliver their piece. The gaps between the pieces belong to nobody, right up until go live weekend.

How IT projects actually end



Successful	29%
Challenged	52%
Failed	19%

Successful means on time, on budget, with a satisfactory result. Challenged means late, over budget or missing features. Source: Standish Group CHAOS Report 2015.

The one question that predicts the outcome

Ask "who can say yes to a scope change, and who hears first when a dependency slips?" If those are two different people, or two different meetings, you have found the first stall before it happens.

> **A project with no single owner is not late yet. It is just early in the process of becoming late.**
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Catch the stall a month before it costs you.

Every stall announces itself. The announcements just do not look like problems yet: a decision deferred twice, a task that has been 90% done for three weeks, a vendor who stops replying on Fridays. Here is the watch list, the response and who owns it.

THE STALL	EARLY WARNING SIGN	THE FIX, AND WHO OWNS IT
Unclear ownership	The same decision is "pending" in two consecutive status meetings	Sponsor names one decision owner with a 48 hour turnaround
Scope creep	New requests arrive by email and nobody prices them	Project lead issues a written change request with cost, time and a signature line
Dependency surprises	A task sits at 90% complete for three weeks running	Project lead runs a dependency walk every week until the list is empty
Part time teams	Hours logged against the project fall below half of plan	Sponsor protects two full days a week or brings in dedicated help
Vendor handoffs	Two vendors each believe the other one owns a task	One integration owner, one shared plan, one weekly call with everyone on it

27%
average cost overrun across 1,471 IT projects studied by Oxford researchers

70%
schedule overrun on the one in six projects that go badly wrong

17%
of large IT projects go so badly they threaten the existence of the company

Who owns what on a healthy project

DECISION	SPONSOR	PROJECT LEAD	IT PARTNER
Scope changes	A	R	C
Budget and spend	A	C	I
Technical design	I	C	A and R
Cutover date	A	R	C
User communications	I	R	C
Acceptance sign off	A	R	C

R responsible, A accountable, C consulted, I informed. Exactly one A per row, always.

Why one A matters

Accountable means the person who answers for the result, and there can only be one. Two accountable people is zero. If a row has no A, that decision will be made by the calendar.

> **Status reports measure activity. Dependency lists measure truth.**
>
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Sources: PMI Pulse of the Profession 2018 and 2020; McKinsey and University of Oxford, Delivering large scale IT projects on time, on budget and on value, 2012; Flyvbjerg and Budzier, Why Your IT Project May Be Riskier Than You Think, Harvard Business Review 2011; Standish Group CHAOS Report 2015.

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02

How to scope so there are no surprises.

Surprises are not random. They are assumptions nobody wrote down. A good scope is less about listing features and more about naming what you do not know yet, who will find out, and what happens when the answer changes. This chapter gives you the method and the documents.

37%
of executives name unclear objectives as the top cause of project failure

61%
success rate for small projects, compared with 6% for the largest

4
documents in a surprise free scope: discovery, requirements, assumptions log, change control

48 hrs
the longest a change request should ever wait for a yes or a no

Scope is a list of what you know and what you do not.

Most scopes are feature lists. A useful scope is three lists: what the project will deliver, what has to be true for that to happen, and what is still unknown, with a name and a date next to it. Here is how to build all three in two weeks.

1. **Discovery, days one to five**
   Walk the environment, interview the people who do the work, and inventory every system the project touches. Count users, licenses, integrations and the data that has to move.

2. **Requirements, in business language**
   Write what the business must be able to do, not which product does it. "Payroll closes by noon on Friday" beats "migrate the payroll server" every time.

3. **The assumptions log**
   Every "we think" goes on a list with an owner and a date to confirm it. Unconfirmed assumptions are where the surprises live, so confirm the scary ones first.

4. **Change control, agreed before kickoff**
   Decide how a change is requested, priced and approved before anyone needs one. One form, one approver, one answer within 48 hours.

> **A scope with no assumptions log is a scope that has not met reality yet.**
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Assumptions log, an excerpt

ASSUMPTION	OWNER	STATUS
All 85 workstations can run Windows 11	IT lead	**Confirmed**
ERP vendor supports single sign on	Project lead	**Open, due Friday**
Internet circuit has 500 Mbps of headroom	Network engineer	**False, upgrade ordered**
Finance can freeze changes for two days	CFO	**Confirmed**
Legacy database export is clean	Data owner	**Open, sampling now**

Three of five confirmed in week one. The two open items set the agenda for week two.

Why the log beats the plan

The project plan tells you what should happen. The assumptions log tells you where it will not. Review it weekly and the surprises move from go live weekend to a Tuesday meeting, where they are cheap.

A FEATURE LIST

What most scopes are

- Fifty line items copied from a vendor proposal.
- Dates picked before anyone checked the dependencies.
- The word "assume" appears nowhere, so every assumption stays hidden.

A REAL SCOPE

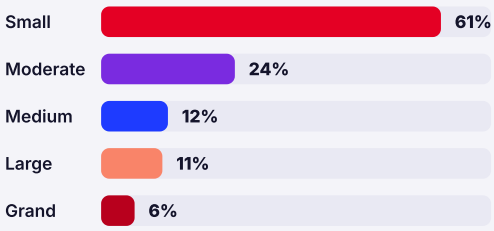
What a scope should be

- Outcomes in business language, each with an acceptance test.
- An assumptions log with an owner and a date on every line.
- Change control agreed before kickoff, with a price on every yes.
- A phase small enough to finish in a quarter.

Small scopes land. Grand ones drift.

The strongest predictor of success is size. Projects small enough to finish in a quarter succeed ten times more often than sprawling ones. Break big initiatives into phases that each deliver something usable, then send every change through the same door at the same price.

Success rate by project size



Share delivered on time, on budget, with a satisfactory result. Source: Standish Group CHAOS Report 2015, resolution by project size.

How to right size a phase

- **Ninety days or less** from kickoff to a result people can use. If it is longer, split it.
- **One owner** who can approve scope, spend and schedule changes without convening a committee.
- **One measurable outcome**, written down before kickoff, so "done" is not a matter of opinion.

The change request, on one page

FIELD	WHY IT IS THERE
What changes	One sentence, in business terms, not a ticket number
Why now	Separates must have from nice to have
Cost and schedule impact	Priced by the delivery team, never guessed by the requester
What gets dropped	Scope is a budget. Adding means removing or paying.
Approved by	The single named sponsor, within 48 hours

Scope creep is a pricing problem

Nobody creeps scope on purpose. It happens because saying yes is free in the moment and expensive in month four. Put a price and a date on every yes and watch the requests sort themselves.

The 48 hour change window

HOUR 0
Requested
The requester fills in the one page form. Verbal requests in hallways do not count.

HOUR 4
Priced
The project lead and delivery team size the cost, the time and what it displaces.

HOUR 24
Decided
The sponsor approves, declines or defers to the next phase. One answer, in writing.

HOUR 48
Scheduled
Approved changes go on the plan with a new date. The baseline moves once, not forever.

52%
of projects experience scope creep, up from 43% five years earlier

37%
of executives name unclear objectives as the top cause of project failure

10x
higher success rate for small projects than for the largest ones

Sources: Standish Group CHAOS Report 2015 (resolution by project size); PMI Pulse of the Profession 2017 and 2018; Solution Builders Professional Services scoping method.

03

In house vs. on demand expertise.

Every project needs people who have done this exact thing before. The question is whether you grow them, borrow them or hire them. The practical answer for most companies with 25 to 500 people is a mix, and the right mix depends on how often you will do this again.

6 wks
for a specialist who has run the project fifty times, versus six months part time

50+
engineers on the Solution Builders bench, covering every specialty a project touches

90
days for an 85 user manufacturer to complete a full transformation, cutting tickets 60%

38%
infrastructure cost cut by a 60 user architecture firm with a cloud native migration

Six months of your best engineer, or six weeks of a specialist.

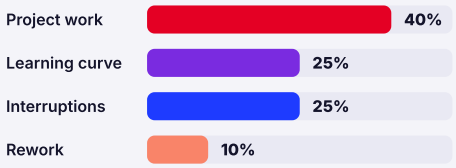
The internal option looks free because nobody writes a check. It is not. Count the hours, the help desk coverage you lose, the learning curve on a product your team will touch once, and the delay. Then compare it with someone who has done it fifty times.

What the project really costs, two ways

	INTERNAL GENERALIST, PART TIME	ON DEMAND SPECIALIST
Calendar time	26 weeks, alongside the day job	6 weeks, dedicated
Hours on the project	About 520, in fragments between tickets	About 240, in sequence
Learning curve	First time on this product	Fiftieth time, pitfalls known
Help desk coverage	Degrades, tickets wait	Unchanged
Rework risk	High, no second opinion on the design	Low, peer reviewed design
Knowledge left behind	In one person's head	Documented, with a handover

Illustrative, based on a typical 85 user infrastructure project. Your numbers will differ. The pattern will not.

Where a part time engineer's project hours go



Illustrative split from Solution Builders project reviews. A dedicated specialist spends most of the week on the project itself.

100+

hours of monthly downtime eliminated for an 85 user manufacturer in 90 days

60%

fewer support tickets after the same project, run by specialists

The hidden line item

The expensive part is not the engineer's salary. It is the 26 weeks the business waits for the result, plus the backlog of everything that engineer did not do while waiting on a vendor ticket.

Three questions before you staff it internally

- **Have we done this exact thing in the last two years?** If not, the learning curve is part of the price.
- **Who covers the day job?** If the answer is "they will manage," tickets will wait and so will the project.
- **What does a month of delay cost the business?** That number is usually larger than the specialist.

Keep the knowledge, borrow the depth.

On demand expertise is not outsourcing your team. It is adding the specialty you need for exactly as long as you need it, while your people keep the context, the relationships and the documentation. Here is how to decide, and how to make sure the knowledge stays.

BUILD IN HOUSE WHEN

You will do this again

- The skill is needed every month, not every five years.
- The system is core to how you make money and you want the muscle.
- You can give the person real time, not leftover time.

BRING IN A SPECIALIST WHEN

You will do this once

- It is a migration, a cutover or a rollout you do every five years.
- The deadline is fixed and the day job is not going away.
- A mistake is expensive: identity, networks, ERP, compliance.
- You want a second set of eyes on the design before you commit.

Knowledge transfer, written into the scope

- [x] As built documentation delivered before the final invoice, not after it.
- [x] A recorded walkthrough of every admin task your team will own from day one.
- [x] Credentials in your password vault, under your control, from the first login.
- [x] Two weeks of shadowing: your engineer drives, the specialist watches and corrects.
- [x] A runbook for the three most likely failures and exactly how to recover from each.

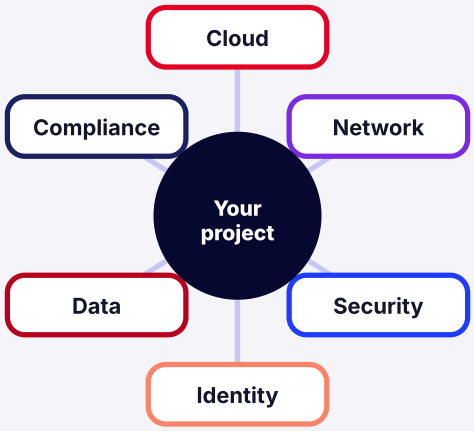
50+

engineers on the Solution Builders bench, so the specialty is one call away

98%

client satisfaction, which is the number a bench has to keep earning

One bench, every specialty a project touches



Co managed is the middle path

Your team keeps ownership, context and the relationships. The bench supplies the specialty, the second opinion and the hours. The project lands, and your people learn from it instead of drowning in it.

Sources: Cost comparison and hours split are illustrative, from Solution Builders project reviews. Client outcomes from Solution Builders engagements: an 85 user manufacturer (90 day transformation) and a 60 user architecture firm (cloud native migration).

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04

A checklist for a clean go live.

Go live is where a project meets the people it was for. A clean one feels boring: the system works on Monday, the help desk is quiet, and the project team goes home on time. Boring is the product of a checklist. Here is ours, all 24 items.

$300K+
per hour: what over 90% of midsize and large enterprises say downtime costs them

T minus 14
days: when the go live checklist starts, not the Friday before

24
items on the checklist, across the two weeks before cutover and the two weeks after

18
of 24 done by the go or no go meeting, or you move the date

A clean go live starts fourteen days before it.

The last two weeks are not for building. They are for freezing, rehearsing and deciding. If the team is still writing configuration on the Thursday before cutover, the cutover has already slipped, whether or not anyone has said so out loud.

T MINUS 14

Freeze and verify

Scope freezes. Every open assumption is confirmed or escalated. Data is sampled.

T MINUS 7

Rehearse

A timed dry run of cutover and rollback, with the real runbook and the real people.

T MINUS 1

Go or no go

A 20 minute meeting with the checklist. Fewer than 18 of 24 done means move the date.

DAY ZERO

Cut over

Follow the runbook, log every step and every time, communicate on schedule.

DAYS 1 TO 14

Hypercare

The project team stays on point. Daily standup, same day fixes, then a formal handover.

Two weeks out

- [x] Acceptance criteria written and signed by the sponsor: what "working" means, in numbers.
- [x] Scope frozen. Anything new goes to phase two, in writing, with a smile.
- [x] Every open assumption confirmed or escalated. The log should be empty or red.
- [x] Rollback plan written, with a trigger, a decision owner and a time limit.
- [x] Communications drafted: the announcement, the day of instructions and the "we rolled back" note.
- [x] Licenses, certificates, DNS access and vendor support contacts confirmed and in the runbook.

One week out

- [x] Full dry run of the cutover runbook, timed, with every step logged.
- [x] Rollback rehearsed once, end to end, not just discussed.
- [x] Pilot group of five to ten real users on the new system for three working days.
- [x] Help desk briefed with the top ten expected questions and the answers.
- [x] Backups of every affected system verified by an actual restore, not a green checkmark.
- [x] Go or no go meeting on the calendar, with the checklist as the only agenda item.

Acceptance criteria you can actually test

VAGUE	TESTABLE
"Email works"	Every user sends and receives on the new platform by 8 a.m. Monday
"Performance is fine"	Order entry screen loads in under two seconds for the pilot group
"Users are trained"	90% of staff completed the 20 minute walkthrough before cutover
"Data migrated"	Record counts match and 50 sampled records verified field by field

Fewer than 18 of 24? Move the date.

A one week slip costs a calendar entry and a slightly awkward email. A failed cutover costs a quarter of goodwill and the next project's budget. The checklist exists so this is a math decision, not a brave one.

Cut over on a schedule, then stay until it is boring.

Cutover is a runbook, not an adventure. Every step has an owner, a time and a line in the log. Then comes the part most projects skip: two weeks of hypercare, where the team that built it answers for it before anyone calls it done.

Cutover window

- [ ] Runbook open. One person reads steps aloud, one person does them, one person logs the times.
- [ ] Point of no return identified in advance and announced out loud when you pass it.
- [ ] Rollback checkpoint at the halfway mark: on schedule, or roll back now.
- [ ] Smoke test by five real users before the all clear, not just by the project team.
- [ ] Status message sent at start, at the checkpoint and at completion, even when nothing is wrong.
- [ ] Old system left running, read only, until hypercare ends. Nothing is decommissioned on day zero.

Hypercare, the two weeks after

- [ ] Project engineers on point for every related ticket, with a 30 minute response target.
- [ ] Daily 15 minute standup with the sponsor: what broke, what was fixed, what is still open.
- [ ] Every issue logged and tagged so the pattern shows: training, configuration or defect.
- [ ] Acceptance criteria measured and reported on day three, day seven and day fourteen.
- [ ] As built documentation and the runbook delivered, reviewed and stored where your team can find them.
- [ ] Formal handover to operations, project closed, lessons learned written down in one page.

_____ / 24

Score yourself

Count the go live items fully done across both pages and write the number here. Under 18, move the date.

The rollback plan, on one page

ELEMENT	WRITE IT DOWN
Trigger	Failure in numbers: "more than 10% of users cannot log in by 7 a.m."
Decision owner	One name, reachable all weekend, with the authority to call it
Time box	The latest moment you can roll back and still be running by 8 a.m. Monday
Steps	Rehearsed once, timed, in the runbook next to the cutover steps
Message	The "we rolled back, here is what happens next" email, drafted in advance

Rolling back is not failing

A rehearsed rollback that gets used is a project doing exactly what it planned. The failure is a team pushing through at 3 a.m. because nobody wrote down when to stop.

Sources: ITIC 2024 Hourly Cost of Downtime Survey; Uptime Institute Annual Outage Analysis 2023; go live checklist from the Solution Builders Professional Services delivery method.

Projects delivered by people who have done it before.

Solution Builders has delivered technology projects for Minnesota businesses since 1995. Professional Services is the I in our RISE framework: 50+ engineers, senior project leads, fixed scopes and a go live your team will barely notice.

R

Resilient

Migrations and cloud projects designed so the business keeps running through cutover.

I

Integrated

Infrastructure, integrations and projects delivered by senior engineers on a fixed scope.

S

Secure

Security and compliance built into every project design and reviewed before cutover.

E

Evolving

AI and Copilot rollouts run as real projects, with governance and adoption planned in.

01

Project Scoping Session

A 30 minute conversation about the project on your desk. You leave with the three assumptions to confirm first.

FREE · 30 MINUTES

02

Discovery and Scope

Two weeks of discovery, requirements, an assumptions log and a fixed scope with a price and a date on it.

FIXED FEE · 2 WEEKS

03

Delivered Project

A senior project lead, the specialists the work needs, change control, a rehearsed cutover and two weeks of hypercare.

FIXED FEE · SCOPED

Talk through your next project in 30 minutes.

Book a free Project Scoping Session with a Solution Builders solution architect. Bring the project, leave with a clearer scope and the first three questions to answer.

Book my scoping session

THE SHORT VERSION

Three things to remember.

If this playbook disappears into a drawer, keep these three ideas. They are the difference between projects that land and projects that linger.

01 **One owner, named, with a 48 hour clock.**

Every stall traces back to a decision nobody owned. Name the person who can say yes before kickoff, and put a clock on it.

02 **Scope is a list of what you do not know yet.**

Write every assumption down with an owner and a date. Send every change through one door, with a price on it.

03 **Go live starts fourteen days early.**

Freeze, rehearse, decide, cut over, stay. Twenty four items. Fewer than eighteen done, move the date.

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START THE CONVERSATION

www.solutionbuilders.com

(952) 854-8188 · 1550 American Blvd East, Suite 900, Bloomington, MN 55425
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