eProject Enterprise™

Case Study

As JFS Consulting Inc. (http://jfsconsulting.com), Jim Salmons and Timlynn Babitsky offer full-service contract tech writing and software development services. Their forte is "soup to nuts" development of documentation sets for object technology products, especially software development tools and object-oriented software frameworks. In the case below, Jim and Timlynn capitalized on the "nifty features" of eProject Enterprise™ to develop a lightweight and highly effective project method, "Extreme Tech Writing," which proved to be the foundation of an unusually successful new client relationship.

A Fast Start

"As a new vendor for our corporate client, we needed to hit the ground running and become as productive as possible, as fast as possible, with as little disruption to the teams already working on a major upgrade to the client's enterprise software development tool suite," Timlynn explained "Our new client, a venture-funded Silicon Valley growth company, had an 'Internet time' culture… meaning too few people, doing too much, with too little time. Sound familiar?"

From the client's standpoint, Jim and Timlynn needed a project method and infrastructure with as little management *overhead* as possible while giving as much management *oversight* as possible. From their contractor's standpoint, they wanted to ensure that they didn't become a scapegoat in the event that nearly impossible schedules and production expectations were not met.

To Jim and Timlynn's delight, their recommendation that the new client deploy eProject Enterprise proved to be unnecessary! Just prior to their recommendation, a non-engineering group within the client organization had begun using eProject Enterprise. All Jim and Timlynn had to do was "plug in" and start running along with the development group working on the software.

Prior To eProject Enterprise

For the last fifteen-plus years, Jim and Timlynn have spent over half of their time as a small two-person consulting firm when they were not involved in promising start-up or emerging-growth employment situations. In almost all cases, developing successful new client and major new project service relationships meant expensive and time-consuming on-site, client visits. "Mind-melds" and "brain-dumps" were the order of the day. Project "infrastructure," initially faxes and courier-based document/disk exchange, gave way to e-mail and electronic file distribution.

"eProject Enterprise fundamentally changed how we manage clients and projects," said Timlynn Babitsky from her home-based office, "Gone are the hectic, unpredictable and costly client and project 'kick-off events'. Clients get their comfort level from being plugged into an easy to use but effective project method/infrastructure, and the up-front information dumps are handled through orderly, discrete issue management and resolution. The client feels a sense of comfort; we certainly feel a sense of comfort. I don't think we could face going back to the old ways of doing business."

The 'Extreme' Tech Writing Method

You don't have to look too far today to find a host of management gurus – from Tom Peters to MIT's Tom Malone – who'll tell you that the business world is fast becoming *project-oriented* as opposed to *organization-oriented*; that is, we're in an era of *process* dominance rather than *structural* dominance. This is true.

But it is also true that not all projects are created equal. Today's projects are not all *schedule-oriented*, although they all usually have deadlines. And, yes, some of today's projects are still the mammoth "Wonder of the World"-scale undertakings. But more often than not, today's projects are smaller, dynamic, collaborative and opportunistic.

These smaller, dynamic projects need to be managed nonetheless. And that's why we have seen the development of "lightweight" project methodologies that emphasize team-based self-management, rapid prototyping and relentless performance- and customer-based testing. In the domain of software engineering, this trend in project management is best typified by the *Extreme Programming* method, so-named by its most-skilled founding practitioner, Kent Beck.

"Kent Beck has synthesized and built upon the Smalltalk programming community's best practices to give us Extreme Programming," said Jim Salmons, "We spent most of the last twenty years in the Smalltalk community with Kent and other gifted developers, so Extreme Programming is a natural and comfortable project methodology for us to apply to our programming-based contract projects."

"As we shifted more of our contract work back into tech writing," Timlynn continued, "we wondered if we could transfer the benefits of Extreme Programming into our tech writing projects. It made intuitive sense that if the concurrent documentation development effort used the same iterative project method that the software development group used, we'd have a reasonable chance to keep the overall project in synch and highly productive."

"Fortunately, eProject Enterprise delivers a number of clever features that handily support team-oriented project collaboration," explained Salmons, "For instance, features like Related Items that let you flexibly interconnect project elements made eProject Enterprise particularly well suited to function as a workflow engine for our Extreme Tech Writing method. It can just as easily meet the needs of traditional project managers pumping MS Project data in and out of the system using eProject Enterprise MS Project synchronization."

Here's a quick overview of Extreme Tech Writing and how Jim and Timlynn used eProject Enterprise to implement their project method:

- Weekly iterative cycles of "Plan a little, do a little, assess and adjust" were implemented with a "backbone" of the eProject Enterprise **Issues** management feature supplemented by mandatory "Friday Drop" deliverables packages announced using the **News** feature.

- "Source code" (FrameMaker document files) and "test-build executables" (Adobe PDF-format files) were effectively managed with the "source control" of the eProject Enterprise **Documents** management feature.

- The project's workflow engine was the **Issues** management feature, used for draft and final chapter reviews, to-be product information requests and project admin. Especially useful was the **Related Links** feature for tying fine-grained 'Review and Approve' issues to their Adobe PDF deliverables version-maintained with the eProject Enterprise **Documents** feature. Adobe Acrobat's reviewer/reader commenting features were essential in implementing an eProject Enterprise 'issue item' as a 'process instance' in the project's workflow system. The automatic e-mail messaging associated with the **Issues** feature was also essential for grabbing team-members' attention and bringing them efficiently into the project's workflow.

- eProject Enterprise's **Discussions**, **Bookmarks** and **Polls** features were useful supplements to the team's collaborations, again made all the more relevant to the team's **Issues**-based workflow through the use of **Related Links**. These 'bread crumb' links kept the team and guest subject matter experts tightly focused on specific deliverables production and nearly eliminated the need for new team member and stakeholder orientation training.

- **Project Templates** allowed 'best practices' cloning of Jim and Timlynn's project method from one contract project to the next. By 'mixing and matching' an appropriate subset of eProject Enterprise features and then documenting their use in the context of a particular project method, Jim and Timlynn have facilitated the use of eProject Enterprise within a class of today's projects that are smaller, highly collaborative, customer/user-focused and deliverables-based.

Client Benefit

A simple, repeatable project method that effectively fit the client's "We don't know how big the breadbox is yet, but we need to start building it today" corporate culture.

Contractor Benefit

Peace of mind. "What we had done and what we planned to do and why," Timlynn explained, "were so well documented and continuously accessible that we slept a lot better during this project than most. A *lot* better."

Lessons Learned

"The greatest frustration for us on this project," Salmons explained, "was the lack of customer involvement in the content envisioning and draft review processes. In the all-to-typical 'fewer doing more' world of corporations trying to remain competitive in an increasingly time-sensitive world, it is only natural that 'optional' tasks – like content outlines and draft reviews – fall through the cracks and simply do not get done when the chips are down and deadlines loom. Involving highly motivated key customers can be a major 'win-win' in such cases; your customers get better products which they embrace and your customers chip in, in effect, to do some useful 'work' within your product development cycle."

A second weakness in their project implementation – the client's extreme "silo culture" – was beyond Jim and Timlynn's control. "On one of the projects we did for this client," Timlynn recalled, "the development group manager decided that the group's bug-tracking database was all the project workflow infrastructure that his team would tolerate. No developers were to use our eProject Enterprise system. " So Jim and Timlynn diligently submitted information-requests as "bug reports" into the system. Intense time-pressures meant that these "non-essential bugs" languished in the system unresolved. Interestingly, the project's "surrogate developer contact", the head of

the Tech Pubs group, assured the project's success by continuing to field and process information requests through the project's eProject Enterprise-based **Issues** feature.

On future Extreme Tech Writing projects, Jim and Timlynn will push for greater customer and development group participation within their eProject Enterprise system. "Our first Extreme Tech Writing projects were tremendously successful from our client's standpoint and very satisfying from our own perspective," concluded Timlynn, "With increased customer involvement and developer support, I'm sure we could crank up our customer satisfaction level to what Tom Peters would call a WOW project… or should we say, a WOW eProject!"

About eProject

eProject is the leading provider of scaleable project collaboration software designed for project-driven organizations. We help businesses achieve key strategic and operational objectives through a comprehensive suite of products and services that enable teams to seamlessly communicate, collaborate, and manage the projects that determine success.

To learn more, contact us at 206.341.9117, email us at sales@eproject.com, or visit us at www.eproject.com.

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