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Article



# How to Keep Customers Happy When Overworked

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## An improving economy means more work for integrators, but do they have the time?

As we start the year with high hopes and expectations, I wanted to bring up a topic that impacted many of us last year. Too much work and too few resources, including time and manpower, to complete that work.

Sounds like a great problem to have, right? Not necessarily, and for two reasons.

First, being overworked doesn't mean you have more business than you can handle. We all know the past few years have been brutal, that the days of having "extra" people around to lend a hand are long gone (if they were ever there).

We've all had to work smarter, work harder, do more with less, and so forth. Sometimes it is austerity measures, while at other times you are able to hire more people, but you just can't hire the right ones.

Or, it very well could be that you have more work than you can handle. The economy is improving by most measures, and virtually all of the integrators I talk to have plenty of work. We've even had integrators decline to bid on projects because they are too busy. Good for them, and good for the economy overall.

Regardless of the reason, the result is the same. There are delays in meeting the agreed-upon schedule, customers get frustrated (and vocal about it), and there is often a hit to your reputation. It's a shame when you work so hard to bid and win a project, it starts out well, and winds up slipping its milestones due to manpower issues.

We all strive for referenceable projects, yet delays are the primary cause of customer dissatisfaction that we hear about when checking references.

This all sounds pretty grim, and, unfortunately, by the time this situation is upon us, it's usually too late to act. The typical solutions are to add more people, which is easier said than done and doesn't usually solve the immediate problem, or take on less work, which doesn't help you today (and good luck convincing anyone to take on less work).

So, if you can't solve this problem, can you at least mitigate it somewhat? When I am in this situation, and sadly it happens more often than I care to admit, my answer is to overcommunicate. I will call or email clients, tell them about the anticipated delays, and give them revised dates that are "worst case," internally.

I will provide updates as to progress, and I will take the blame for the delays. Most people appreciate knowing what is going on, understand the situation, and will work with you. Sure, we want to keep everybody happy, and we try and set

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realistic deadlines in the first place, but sometimes Murphy gets in the way and other times changing needs reorder your schedule and priority.

I've found bad news is better than no news, and we do our best to overcommunicate when we have a problem.

How about the ones that won't take "later" for an answer? Well, that is a clear measure of how you need to re-prioritize. I'm not saying you delay projects at the expense of other ones, but if you have any wiggle room you know where it is best applied.

How do I know this works? Because it works on me. When projects are running late, some of the integrators working with us are upfront about it, providing weekly reports and informing us of delays. Others just disappear, neglecting to give us weekly status reports because they don't have enough to report. Guess which ones get called back to bid on other projects, and score higher in our integrator database?

Sure, this takes time that you may not have, but common sense tells us that it is far easier to prevent a fire than to extinguish one.

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