

Growing Stress at Twitter

As Kathy Norten, operations project manager at Twitter points out, the company is growing awfully fast. At the beginning of 2009, Twitter had 5 million registered users; 20 months later, it had 125 million. Every day, another 300,000 people sign up for a new account. In its first 3½ years, it sent out 10 billion tweets; in the last 5 months, it sent out another 10 billion tweets. Worse, the demand ebbs and flows with great volatility and without warning, ranging from an average of 750 tweets per second to over 3,000 when some exciting world event happens. The problem is to keep Twitter's site running smoothly with all this growth and volatility of demand. Although responsible for routine applications management and hardware allocation projects, as well as leading high-profile 4-month projects such as establishing a custom-built data center near Salt Lake City, UT, when there is a database problem affecting service, Norten says that its

"all hands on deck." For these crisis situations, Twitter has established an "on-call" roster of top managers to take charge, and then, as Norten puts it, you drop everything and get to work! It's a chaotic environment for leading projects with "no model to follow" and no processes in place, so Norten has to be creative and invent them, but that's what makes being a project manager so appealing.

Questions

1. Which of Kent's six ways to keep stress under control do you think might work for a project manager at Twitter?
2. Would you like Norten's job? Why (not)?
3. Is it possible in a fast-growth company to avoid stress?

Source: M. Whealey, "Avoiding the Fall Whale," *PM Network*, Vol. 24.

3.4 Problems of Cultural Differences

In this section, we raise a number of issues that plague certain projects. Sometimes these projects require cooperation by individuals and groups from different countries. Sometimes they require cooperation by individuals or groups in one country, but from different industries or even from different divisions of the same firm. It is not, however, the geographical or organizational differences that matter, it is the differences in *cultures*. Moreover, it is not merely the differences in culture that matter, it is also differences in the *environments* within which projects are conducted, as we mentioned at the start of this chapter, the economic, political, legal, and sociotechnical environments. While the impacts of these dissimilarities are greatest and most visible in the case of international projects, they exist to some extent any time different organizations (including different parts of one organization) are asked to work together on a project. Throughout this book, we emphasize that the PM must manage and reduce conflict between the stakeholders in a project: the project team, client, senior management, and the public. If the stakeholders represent different nations, industries, and firms, the conflicts and problems besetting the project are greater by an order of magnitude.

"Culture" refers to the entire way of life for a group of people. It encompasses every aspect of living and has four elements that are common to all cultures: technology, institutions, language, and arts (*The World Book*, 1997). The *technology* of a culture includes such things as the tools used by people, the material things they produce and use, the way they prepare food, their skills, and their attitudes toward work. It embraces all aspects of their material lives. The *institutions* of a culture make up the structure of the society: the organization of the government, the nature of the family, the way in which religion is organized, the division of labor, the kind of economic system adopted, the system of education, and the way in which voluntary associations are formed and maintained. *Language*, another ingredient of all cultures, is always unique because it is developed in ways that meet the expressed needs of the culture. The translation of one culture's language into another's is rarely precise because words carry connotative meanings as