

The → Critical → Path → is → "Too → Late"

I know the title just rocked your terra firma and I realize I am preaching scheduling and control anarchy, but I'll risk it. Keep in mind that critical path in my article title is zero total float or less. For the sake of non-schedules or those who have forgotten, total float is equal to the late dates minus the early dates. The critical path is "the longest time path through my work flow or network representing my project scope that tells us the earliest our project can finish."

In lay terms, what this all means is the critical path is telling us the estimated finish date of our project based on the information we fed into it. Now if we could have done a stop frame while we reviewed and analyzed the project's critical path, we might have a chance on fixing the broken project elements so as to prevent any project delays. If you have the specifications for such a time machine, please submit them to the author.

For now I will proceed with this article without such specifications. When we all took management 101, one of the early concepts we learned is to become to the best of our abilities, a "proactive manager." Now let's take that very underused term and apply it to managing a project. The object is to use the project team's experience and management abilities to understand where we are, how we got there and do the best we can to plan or adjust our current plan to keep the project momentum going. We want, whenever possible, to avoid initiating the fire alarm.

Now, if your current critical path is really the hard logic (absolute) critical path, impacts to the activities along that path, no matter what we do will affect the immediate critical path. Given the nature of a critical path network, what this usually means is that activities not originally on this path will now make their way to the controlling path of remaining work -- new critical paths.

Our biggest problem as proactive managers is that we failed to make visible those items, now not critical, before they became critical. Instead, we wore the blinders that restricted our view to the zero total float or less critical path. We fought fires rather than acted as the proactive planners that we were taught to be. We failed to watch the "big picture." It is a line manager's job to watch the ongoing work and a project team's job to keep the road paved ahead. To timely fix the road ahead, we must see the road and understand what repairs are required. Concentrating only on the zero total float or less critical path blocks our foresight.

Primavera has always provided us the instrument to be proactive managers and remove the blinders. We, as proactive managers, must learn to use the tools provided and understand what they are telling us. Now with Primavera's tight integration to other toolsets such as Pertmaster we can look beyond the zero total float boundary.

No one knows tomorrow with absolute certainty. However, ignoring the probabilities that tomorrow will bring is resigning ourselves to a "fire truck job": strictly reactive and immediate problem solving. We all know that tomorrow brings change, the repeat of ignored problems, realization of risk, and new unforeseen problems. Open your purview beyond that pretty red line. Look beyond the zero total float critical path.

**Gordon H. Aronson, P.E.
President
Vision Consultants, LLC**