

# ACTION ITEM LISTS

## Help or Hindrance?

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I recently attended an Integrated Product Team, Working Group, Tiger Team, or maybe it was a Red Team meeting (I forget). Near the start of the meeting, we spent over an hour reviewing the Action Item list from the last meeting; at the end of the meeting we spent still more time reviewing the action items generated during the current meeting. Today, I received the updated Action Item list from the last meeting whose title escapes me, which caused me to ponder the following questions regarding Action Item lists.

### *Why do we have Action Item lists?*

They give the appearance that we are doing something. We are taking action!

### *How are Action Items generated?*

Randomly. At any time during a meeting, an attendee may ask a question that cannot be immediately answered, and it then becomes an action to answer the question in the future. At some point, someone realizes and expresses that some action should be taken, and someone else captures it as an Action Item. However, the reason for the Action Item is often not captured, so that months later the

question may surface, "Why did we generate that Action Item?"

### *Who generates Action Items?*

As described previously, it could be anyone. It could be two people out of 50 agreeing to do something, or it may be a single question begging to be answered. Regardless, placing it on the Action Item list makes it the property of the group and the Action Item list administrator.

### *How are Action Items defined?*

Normally, in as few words as possible to fit into the Action Item spreadsheet. As a result, the details of the action – what specifically should be done – may be lost.

### *How are Action Items managed?*

Placing an Action Item on a list gives the appearance of management. However, if no one follows up on the Action Item list and no one follows up to ensure actions are completed, there is no management. A few days or weeks before the next meeting, the Action Item list is distributed and individuals are reminded that they had agreed to take some action months ago

that has not been done. Or, in some instances the list may contain an Action Item already completed, but no one told the Action Item list administrator to clear it from the current list.

### *How are Action Items closed?*

When the action is completed; when it is overcome by events; when the person responsible for taking the action departs the group; when it is replaced by a new action; when the purpose of the action is forgotten; or when no one cares about it anymore. (Only one of the preceding choices is good.)

### *And my point is?*

Action Item lists may have a good purpose in theory. However, in practice they may be more trouble than they are worth.

**Editor's Note:** Hewitt is a retired Army colonel and former Project Manager for the Army Data Distribution System. For questions or comments, contact him at [lhewitt@aol.com](mailto:lhewitt@aol.com).

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