

How To Create A Work Breakdown Structure

Jargon Buster:

A Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) is a chart that represents all the work to be done in order to complete your project. It's a visual list of activities.

Work Breakdown Structure. Sounds complicated, doesn't it?

It really isn't! A Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) is a tool to help you break down your project work into smaller, manageable chunks. It's simply a list of activities organised as component parts. There are no dates and no sequencing.

It's a perfect way to get clear on what you will be delivering and what tasks you have coming up.

Here's how to create a WBS in 5 easy steps.

Step 1: Write Down The Major Tasks

What are the major tasks that you have to do? Think about what your project is going to produce. For example, if you are organizing an event, you'll have to do work around organizing the venue, organizing catering, sending out invites and so on. Your project will probably have a few big ticket items that you know you have to do.

If your project involves a team it is a good idea to identify these together. Brainstorm everything that you might be expected to do as part of the project. Start by just writing down everything without getting concerned about the level of detail. Then pick out the top level major ones. These will form the top level of your WBS.

Step 2: Break The Tasks Down

Now you know what your major activities are, you can get into the next level of detail. Break the task down into smaller pieces of work. For example, if you have 'Send out invites' as one of your major activities, you will need to design invites, print invites, produce guest list, post invites and perhaps other tasks too.

Each of these tasks has to be completed before you can say that 'Send out invites' is finished. Write these sub-tasks underneath their parent task. This is the next level down of your WBS.

Step 3: Break Them Down Again

Take the next level of tasks and break them down again. Carrying on with our invites, 'Design invites' might have sub-tasks of Design event logo, Choose colours, Produce drafts, Sign off final design, Pay designer or similar.

Write these tasks underneath their parent task (which is a parent task of the whole project). You will start to see that your chart is starting to look like a pyramid, or a traditional organisational hierarchy chart.

If you need to break tasks down even further, then do it. Go to the level that makes sense for your project and your team.

Step 4: Number Your Tasks

What you have now is a complete list of all the tasks that you have to do in order to get your project done. It's quite an effort to refer to tasks by their full name each time, and it risks misunderstandings, so project managers number their activities to make it easier to refer to the work in other documents.

Start at the top of your hierarchy and label the first big activity 1. Then each sub-task is 1.1, 1.2 and so on. Each sub-sub-task is 1.1.1, 1.1.2 etc. Carry on until each task has a number that identifies where it falls in the tree.

Step 5: Add the Detail

Now you've got a numbered list of tasks: everything you have to do on your project. You can now add some detail.

For each task, make a note of who is going to do it, how long you think it will take, how much money it's going to cost and anything else useful. Keep this in a separate document. You will use all this information to help you build a project schedule, which is where you put the tasks into the right order.

You're done! You now have a complete WBS with accompanying detail about every activity and you should feel super confident that you know exactly what you have to do to finish your project.

Pro Tip: Remember that as your project changes, your WBS will fall out of date. Add a note to your diary to go back and update it so it always reflects the work you have to do.
