

Work Breakdown Structure

What it is:

A work breakdown structure (WBS) is a process for defining the final and intermediate products of a project and their relationships. Generally, WBS uses a tree diagram/structure diagram to show the resolution of overall requirements into increasing levels of detail. WBS allows a team to accomplish its general requirements by partitioning a large task into smaller components and focusing on work that can be more easily accomplished. (See also Tree Diagram and Action Plan.)

When to use it:

A work breakdown structure is an essential element in project planning and project management. In the quality planning process, WBS begins with a generalized goal and then identifies progressively finer levels of actions needed to accomplish the goal. In the quality improvement process, the tool is especially useful for creating an implementation plan to remedy identified process problems. For WBS to accurately reflect the project, however, it is essential that the team using it have detailed understanding of the tasks required.

How to use it:

Identify the primary requirement or objective. This should be a clear item, based on customer requirements, to which the entire team agrees. Write this requirement at the top of the chart.

Subdivide the requirement statement into major secondary categories. These branches should represent requirements, products, or activities that directly lead to the primary objective or that are directly required to fulfill the overall requirement. The team should continually ask, “What is required to meet this condition?”, “What happens next?”, and “What needs to be addressed?” Write the secondary categories below the primary requirement statement. Using sticky notes at this stage makes later changes easier to accomplish.

Break each major heading into greater detail. As you move from top to bottom in the WBS, products and activities should become more and more specific. Stop the breakdown when each task is tiny enough to be easily completed and evaluated for accuracy. If the team does not have enough knowledge to continue at some point, identify the individuals who can supply the information and continue the breakdown later with those individuals present.

Review the WBS for logic and completeness. Make sure that each subheading and path has a direct cause-and-effect relationship with the one before. Examine the paths to ensure that no obvious products or actions have been left out. Also ensure that the development of listed products or completion of listed actions will indeed lead to the anticipated results.

Work Breakdown Structure Example

