

Can you afford *not* to update your project management skills?

Nicola McCrudden considers the case for ensuring your knowledge of Project Management is up-to-date.



In times of prosperity, projects provide an opportunity to increase the range of services for your customers. However, in times of economic hardship, running a successful project can supplement the income of your organisation. And if managed well, delivering on a projects aims can go a long way to increase the reputation of both the project manager and the organisation.

“a project is a unique temporary endeavour, with a set beginning and end”

Project Management Institute

All projects, even the relatively small ones, involve a significant commitment of money and time (both directly and indirectly), and they can achieve fantastic outcomes - think for example of some of the earliest examples of successful project management: the building of the pyramids and the construction of the Great Wall of China!

But so many of today’s projects are not delivered on time, on budget, or simply don’t meet their objectives. They fail.

According to the 2002 KPMG study, which surveyed 134 public companies, a massive 56% of respondents had written off at least 1 I.T. project in the previous year.

It’s not just I.T. projects - central government is regularly lambasted in the media for project failure. (The most recent example being the NHS National Programme for IT). It seems that no sector or organisation is immune to project management disasters.

Few projects go as badly wrong as the re-development Wembley Stadium in 2000. It started badly, with a 2 year delay because of financial and political problems. Then there were serious contractual problems that ended in court battle, the wrong type of concrete was used in the foundations and the arch design had to be changed because it was unsafe. All in all, the completion of the stadium was over a year late and £300million over budget.

We may reassure ourselves by ensuring that our projects won't go 'the Wembley way' because we are managing them in Microsoft Project, or controlling everything in the 'all singing, all dancing' spreadsheet that we've developed. But project management is more than computerised documents.

The cost of mismanagement is not just financial!

Consider the lost opportunities held within a failed project. The company contracted to project manage the construction of the new Wembley envisaged being completed at least 12 months earlier. What projects did they have to forego because of the extension of the Wembley project?

Opportunity costs have been categorised as 2-fold: the direct financial cost of the failed project (and associated lost business) and the loss of other projects that could not be taken up because of the staffing capacity held within the failing project.



But it could be argued that there is a 3rd opportunity cost lost in a failed project - that of reputation. In today's harsh financial climate, reputation is more important than ever in securing future business. How many of us can afford to have our professional reputation blemished by an unsuccessful and possibly costly project?

So, why do projects fail?



Many researchers have tried to define exactly why projects fail. The list they have produced is almost infinite, but could be broadly categorised into 4 sub-headings:

- Commitment to the cause
- Project Planning
- Control and Management
- Execution / Delivery

Commitment to the cause. Projects involve people, affect people and other people have the power to influence a projects outcome (stakeholders). Failed projects often don't secure management buy-in, build the commitment of the project teams, and fail to engage stakeholders at the right level.

Project Planning. Failing to plan is, as we all know, planning to fail. Projects without a specific identifiable need and achievable targets have set themselves up for failure - how do you know if

you succeed if you don't know what success looked like when you started? Inadequate planning from the outset: lack of a proper rationale and unrealistic scheduling and budgeting is a recipe for disaster.

Control and Management. Project managers usually need to be master plate spinners. Projects are frequently tagged onto peoples 'day jobs', and not acknowledging the time commitment needed to project manage leads to competing demands on the project managers time and often project failure.

Execution / Delivery. The best laid schemes of mice and men often go askew. Accidental project management (management without good knowledge and skills) can lead to fatal errors in project deliver - missing crucial indicators of risks and issues or succumbing to the deadly 'project creep'.

But, arguably, what underlies all of these risk factors, are the skills, knowledge and preparedness of the project manager. Bev Spence (Charity Events Organiser) certainly thinks so, "If you rely on an untrained project manager, or someone who manages by 'gut feel' you increase the likelihood that they'll miss a crucial step or those all important indicators that things aren't as they should be".

Investing in your Project Management skills

That's where training comes in. Today, there are almost as many methods of learning project management skills as there are projects. From formal qualifications such as the Office of

Government Commerce owned PRINCE II (Project IN Controlled Environments) to picking up a DIY guide from the local book store.

We think our 1 day project management course addresses the needs of many of today's managers. It takes the novice and the experienced project managers through the lifecycle of the project. Providing all the background knowledge and skills needed to undertake comprehensive project planning, engage and manage stakeholders, co-ordinate a project team, and control project risks. The easy to follow workshop, provides delegate with a user friendly manual that they'll turn to again and again.

"A comprehensive and informative course. Learning about Project Management in an informal, easy to understand and enjoyable way."

Sally Taylor, Eastbourne
Cultural Community Network

But if you really can't take the time out to attend a training course, or it's just a case of needing to brush up on your project management processes - then we can help there too! The recently re-launched McCrudden Training website (www.mccrudden-training.co.uk) offers for sale a professionally developed resource that can be taken off the shelf and used directly. It even includes step by step instructions on how to use each template.

Given the cost of a failed project - can you really afford not to invest in your project management?

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For details of Project Management training courses provided by McCrudden Training call 0845 257 5871 or visit www.mccrudden-training.co.uk