

# *It's About the People, People!*

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It is too easy to blame technology when a project fails. But the reality is that, in



most cases, it isn't the technology at all - it's the people, people! Technology is a wonderful asset. Not many people in the world will deny that. It allows us to communicate, calculate, organize and store information at lightning speed. It also allows us to better transform and reengineer our business processes by leveraging it to reduce costs and increase performance. However, if technology is viewed as the ultimate solution and not an enabler to a

solution, it becomes a problem. In addition, if organizations believe that every part of a technology tool has to be used (it's there for a reason, isn't it?); a project could be doomed from the start. In fact, the reason that many projects fail has nothing to do with the technology itself but the process that people go through when they implement a project. Adding to the mystery, there are instances in which a project was successfully implemented only to fail a year or two later.

## **Is it the technology?**

I have been a part of numerous technology implementations over the years and rarely has the technology been so inflexible that it could not meet most customers' requirements. Gone are the days of having to "hard code" changes and customize a system to meet an organization's requirements. Today's technology is "configurable." What this really means is that many software vendors have created a customer interface or administration portal that will allow customers to add fields, change field labels, set up workflows and add table values. This not only speeds up the implementation process but enables customers to be more in charge of their own destiny. One would think that this would help the implementation success rate, but until we address the basic reasons that projects have failed in the past, all the improvements in technology will not help an organization. It is not surprising that technology sometimes becomes the scapegoat when projects fail. Why? Because it is an easy target and can't easily fight back. Software firms try to combat the accusations by defending the product and pointing to the implementation team or implementation process. The sad truth is that more times than not, they are correct. In survey after survey, a constant theme seems to emerge. Projects are not being managed in a way that guarantees success.

*The 2006 Chaos Report from The Standish Group revealed that only 35 percent of software projects started in 2006 could be categorized as successful. This result is better than the 19 percent reflected in 1994.*

A great debate is taking place about why projects are not successful. I have distilled what I believe are the greatest causes of project failure into the following three categories:

- People not being able to agree on the project's outcome
- People not talking with people
- People not understanding how to successfully manage a project

The following sections provide a discussion on each.

### **People not being able to agree on the project's outcome (Managing Customer Expectations)**

This directly relates to not having the customer and the project manager in sync on the project goals and agreeing (and

thoroughly understanding) the project deliverables. If this understanding does not occur, this situation becomes a very dangerous one for project managers. In the end, it will not matter what they do or what they deliver, the attention will always be focused on what wasn't delivered. A key to getting agreement is being able to communicate and agree on what is possible and, more important, what is *not* possible within the confines of the project. The bulk of this confusion comes from a false assumption, made especially in technology-related projects, that everything can be solved by the technology project and that by completing the project all of the customer's problems are going to go away. "All employees will be correctly paid—on time every time—by implementing this new payroll software,"

*In the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's 2008 Federal Human Capital Survey employees were asked to react to the following statement: "Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization." Only 59.7% of the responses were positive. In 2004 59.5% were positive and in 2006, 58.2% were positive.*

Well, not exactly. Some payroll processes do not lend themselves well to a computer and may need human evaluation and judgment. Some business processes are too expensive to automate or occur so infrequently that they should not be automated. Was that planned for, communicated and understood at the beginning of the project? On the services and consulting side of the world,



the belief exists that if you just throw enough "smart" people at a project, it will all work out. However, throwing "smart" people at a project that does not have an agreement on what the successful project outcome is could be a very frustrating experience for everyone concerned.

Sadly, this happens in many projects. Project managers have to be able to communicate to customers in clear terms not only what they are going to

accomplish but what they are not going to accomplish. Many times these are not easy discussions to have, but it is absolutely essential that they occur before the project begins rather than haunt the project throughout. After the project starts, will exceptions arise? Of course, there will always be exceptions and changes in most project implementations. But the challenge is to ensure that the exceptions do not drive or derail the project and that one is able to manage all project expectations by communicating the impact of exceptions on the overall project. Just because something is possible doesn't mean it should be implemented. Being able to effectively understand customer expectations and to communicate what is and is not possible are essential for a successful project.

### **People not talking with people (Communication)**

George Bernard Shaw once stated, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." I will add to that—even when communication has apparently taken place—was it clear and concise? Was it truly understood? The problem is that everyone brings to a situation a different set of definitions, backgrounds and experiences as well as different learning or communication styles. So to simply expect everyone to understand what is being communicated the first time it is stated is pretty simplistic. Is it any wonder that we are most comfortable working with people whom we have successfully worked with in the past? The prime reason is that the longer we work together, the better we learn to communicate with each other and not only to communicate but to understand each other. And there *is* a difference between communicating and understanding. I may be a good communicator but it doesn't do me any good if the information that I am trying to convey is not clearly understood. So in the context of successfully completing a project, it is critical that all of the people participating in it understand what is being communicated. That responsibility falls on project managers and it is not the easiest of their responsibilities. Consider that project managers spend 90 percent of their time communicating with everyone related to the project from customers, stakeholders and vendors to internal resources and, of course, their project teams. Add to that the fact that, in most cases, many if not all of the people are working together for the first time. It is the role of project managers to bring all these people together to develop a roadmap or project plan that will get them the desired results. Once that plan is in place, they must be able to consistently and constantly champion it in order

*Many people believe that they already listen well, but research has shown that often:*

- *We hear half of what is said*
- *Listen to half of that*
- *Understand half of that*
- *Believe half of that and*
- *Remember just half of that.*



for the plan to succeed. This involves a concentration of communication methods to:

- Report project process to leadership and reinforce project goals;
- Elicit all stakeholders to engage in the process so that they act as advocates;
- Guide the project team so that all its members have the same understanding when it comes to planning, executing and monitoring the project to completion; and
- Update the customer on project progress and the value that the team is bringing to the customers organization.

In addition, employees who will be affected by the project should be involved in the process and made to feel that their experiences and expertise are valued and being taken into consideration in its overall design. This involves a different kind of communication. The first question most people ask and usually the last one to be answered is “How does this affect me?” The second question is usually “How can I help?” Both are great questions and the answers need to be communicated so that they do not create confusion, which can turn into opposition or apathy.

While we are on the subject of communication, it bears pointing out that the method used to communicate is sometimes as important as the message itself.

In person is the best method and e-mail the worst. The reason is simple.

Interpersonal interactions allow for more types of communication such the use and reading of facial expressions, such as eye contact; tone of voice; and body language. Many studies have stated that a significant percentage of communication effectiveness is determined by nonverbal cues, which are lacking in printed and audio communication.

As mentioned above, project managers spend a great deal of time communicating. The good ones always look for ways to validate that they have been understood and are communicating effectively.

### **People not understanding how to successfully manage a project (Project Management)**

Wikipedia states that Project Management “... is the discipline of planning, organizing and managing resources to bring about the successful completion of specific projects.” Each project will have a specific set of objectives and deliverables that has been agreed upon by both the project manager and the customer. The project manager is tasked with successfully delivering only those objectives and deliverables. Nothing more and nothing less. The above definition states that the project manager must be able to “manage resources.” These resources could take the form of people, time and money. The use of resources for anything other than meeting the project’s objectives is undesirable. They rob the project of the very resources it needs for its successful completion. Resources are typically diverted by customers because of one or more of the following:

- They have changed their minds about what they would like delivered.

You can always get it fast,  
good or cheap.  
But you can only get two of the three.

- They want more or less than what was agreed upon to be delivered.
- They want it done faster.
- They cannot obtain the resources on their end, which in turn affects the project manager's resources.

So what are project managers to do?

They have always been told that customers are always right.

We tell them: Without customers, there is no business.

And so they take the first step and give customers what they ask for, even though it is not technically within the scope of the project. Naturally, customers come back and ask for more.

“You gave me this but what I really need is that. Oh, and, by the way, can you do this?”

Thus starts the cycle of having the project spiral out of control. One is either going to have to use more people, time or money or a combination thereof to keep the project on track. In many cases, that is not enough. In addition, the impact on the project's quality or risk is not fully considered. If we fast-forward to the end of the project, we end up in a series of meetings with unhappy customers because they did not get what was promised on time and within budget. Then another set of internal corporate meetings is needed to discuss why the project manager did not use resources wisely.

“Why was the project not completed successfully and profitably on time? We gave you all of the resources you needed!”

These are not pleasant conversations and can be avoided with stronger project management skills and support.

Remember, project managers must have split personalities—be a chameleon of sorts. On the one hand, they do have to be sensitive to customers and share their insights, experience, advice and counsel on what to do and how to do it. On the other hand, they are running a business. Their business consists of successfully and profitably performing the project they were assigned. Does that mean the project is set in stone? Not at all. However, the project manager should always be weighing the resources (remember—people, time and money) it will take to make that change. Project managers need to remind customers that project services added or changed will need to go through a change review process, and the impact of that change in terms of people, time and money will be communicated back for the customers' approval. In order for program managers to be in a position to do this, they need to start out with clear project plans that specify the project's scope to a level of detail at which a project manager can determine whether a request is in or out of scope.

Once a project has been implemented, organizations tend to believe that it will run itself—forever. If they get new employees, they



send them to get trained on the software and then turn them loose. Eventually these employees are promoted and they take on new duties elsewhere. New employees come onboard and learn to perform the work from others. After a year or two, users and customers are not as satisfied as they once were. There isn't the clean, crisp operational effectiveness that there once was. The software doesn't do what we need it to do. People are making too many mistakes. Sound familiar?

Hey, let's start the process all over again and buy something new!

Did the project fail? Yes and no. The project delivered everything that it was supposed to and was closed out on time and under budget. So in that sense, it was a success. However, sometimes a project should be judged by its operational sustainability and not just whether it finished on time and under budget. Plans should be put in place to ensure there is a strong ongoing training component built into any operation. The training should not only cover the technology but the functional competencies needed to perform the operation. In practice, the two should be blended to maximize understanding. The fact that users spent three days learning a technology on a generic system does little when they return and have to perform work on their customized and reconfigured systems. The injection of functional knowledge into the technology training process will ensure that personnel understand not only how to use the technology but how to apply it most effectively and efficiently to their work.

Actually, I misstated.

The functional training should be injected by the technology. After all, technology is the means, not the end! This blend of functional and technical understandings has to occur so that when people are faced with business process exceptions they will be able to understand from a functional standpoint how to manage it and will know from a technology standpoint how to process it.

In addition, a baseline should always be established at the beginning of a project and should be used to measure the projects success. How was the project running when it turned into an operation? How is it running now? What is the

difference and why has it occurred? The answers to these questions should all roll off the operation manager's tongue. So in the end, we have come full circle: it all goes back to paying attention to the people. People who can effectively lead and manage resources; people who understand how to communicate and be understood; people who can manage expectations and exceptions; and people who can transfer success from projects to operations.



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Mr. Prokop joined FPMI as a director in May 2006. He has 25 years of experience in managing business development, human capital, training and technology initiatives in the federal and state government marketplaces as well as in the commercial sector. At FPMI, he assesses market opportunities, partnership arrangements and contract acquisition/expansion activities and leverages the company's diverse capabilities into new client relationships and performance engagements. He previously served as assistant vice president and director of the Federal Government Practice Accounts of Aon Consulting. He also served as director for several workforce management and human capital software companies and spent 13 years in progressively responsible human capital/technology positions within the Fairfax County School System. He is a published author and training seminar specialist and holds a B.S. in Business Administration from West Virginia University. He can be reached at 703 426-8510 or at [bprokop@fpmi.com](mailto:bprokop@fpmi.com).

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