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# Project Managers:

## > Lessons Learned?

“ Companies that are struggling to stay competitive, especially in these difficult times, are turning to project management’s task-based approach of ‘getting things done’ on-time and on budget. ”

**P**roject management has shifted from its traditional base in industries such as aerospace, engineering and construction to become a core process across a variety of sectors such as transport, IT and pharmaceuticals. Companies that are struggling to stay competitive, especially in these difficult times, are turning to project management’s task-based approach of ‘getting things done’ on-time and on budget. For many, projects are now part of everyday business life and most people will find themselves managing a project or being part of a project team at some point in their working life. The terms ‘project’ and ‘programme’ have become associated with company initiatives of varying complexities ranging from moving office to marketing the launch of a new generation of products.

In the public sector, policy implementation and the acquisition and management of equipment and services are managed as projects and programmes. Yet year after year, the National Audit Office (NAO) and Public Accounts Committee, report huge overruns in time and cost, bringing into question not only project governance but the government’s ability to deliver value for money. The media have been quick to publicise the failure of high profile projects such as the NHS programme to digitise patient records. Reported as one of the largest IT programmes in the world at £6.2bn,

it was criticised for the lack of stakeholder involvement and for being severely delayed and overspent.

The failure of the Child Support Agency’s (CSA) new IT system, ‘CS2’, was another highly publicised fiasco. It launched in 2006 despite having known critical defects. Three years later, the NAO found more than 1,000 reported problems, 400 of which appeared ‘insoluble’. Vertex Data Science Limited was recruited to try and reduce the backlog of cases. The Work and Pensions Committee estimated the cost of managing the clerical cases alone to be around £3.7m per month. In both these cases, failure can be attributed to a lack of transparency and accountability, poor planning, inadequate management information and a breakdown in communication with key contractors.

Projects and programmes are now commonplace in both the private and public sector. Large, more established project-based organisations will adopt methodologies that are aligned with one of the professional bodies. For government projects, specific procedures or frameworks are provided by the relevant government agency or the Office of Government Commerce. Many will also operate their own centre of excellence or academy to deliver project management training and develop their project staff.

The processes used in a project are only one of a host of internal and external stresses and demands that project managers and their teams have to cope with. Closer examination of the problems that the NHS and the CSA faced, reveals that project size and context, structure, technical complexity, stakeholder relational dynamics, economics, politics and even the media all have a role in the project outcome. It seems 21st century project management is about the capacity for reliable performance in a messy, complex and uncertain world.

An observation from our recent work with professional institutions, business and public sector sponsors is a growing appreciation of the need to take a holistic approach to projects. The ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sides of project management are essentially two-sides of a coin. There has been a notable shift in mindset to accept that project management as a capability encompasses more than just how to do projects. Effective managers will have developed the cognitive ability to fathom and provide for the unintended consequences which accompany every decision or action. The new generation of managers, if properly trained and supported, need to work with people and processes. Project management may finally be maturing as a profession. **MF**

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