

22 Reasons that contribute to projects failing – and some cures.

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Project Management is a growing area as more and more organisations use the underlying methodologies, processes, etc to shape up and deliver successfully, to time, budget and quality, any piece of work that can be deemed a “project”. However, delivering a successful project is not easy. Failure can be construed as “anything not delivered as promised”. This includes overrun timescales and budget, scope creep, not meeting user requirements, a poor quality product delivered – or more dramatically, the cancellation of a project. So what contributes to failure and how can it be avoided. Read on.

The reasons – and the cures:

1. An ill defined business case:

The business case is weak because it was rushed in order to meet unrealistic deadline for approval.

The cure: Take time and care to build a convincing and realistic case and get all stakeholders to buy into it.

2. Stakeholder commitment is lacking:

Not all stakeholders have bought into the need for the project either because they have not been convinced, or they think the benefits are not achievable.

The cure: Are the stakeholders the right ones – if not who are. Ensure the need for the project and benefits are realistic then convince stakeholders. Perhaps the pessimism of the stakeholders is valid and the project should be cancelled.

3. Requirements are not well understood:

The requirements are vague as a result of poor analysis and/or badly presented.

The cure: Requirements gathering, analysis and presentation must be carried out in a highly professional manner – not only to dispense any doubt but to ensure requirements are accurate and well understood.

4. Requirements change along the way:

Either because the original requirements were inaccurate, because scope has crept or new requirements have been allowed without approval.

The cure: Obviously, get the requirements and scope right in the first place. Do not agree any new requirements without the appropriate approval, which may require a supplementary business case.

5. Lack of project management and project sponsor leadership:

The project manager is inexperienced or he/she has too much work on their plate to give proper attention to all aspects of project management. The project sponsor takes little interest in the project.

The cure: Make sure the project manager is up to the job and has the skills and experience demanded by the project. Find out why the project sponsor is not committed - perhaps the sponsor should be changed.

6. Timescales and/or budgets overrun:

Several factors can cause this. They include poor estimating, tasks are more complex than originally thought, the skills and experience of the project team do not match the complexity of the project, scope creep, requirements keep changing, delays in getting key decisions, lack of user support, etc, etc.

The cure: Take great care with the business case and the inception process - getting these early stages of a project will reap great dividends later on. Do not under any circumstances skip here and ensure all stakeholders are bought in, the project board and steering committee membership is of the right level and has sufficient power and influence to get things done (see more on these two bodies below).

7. Change control is neglected:

Many projects (if not all!!) meet change along the way. This can range from additional, approved, requirements to a re-alignment of scope to additional budget for an unforeseen rise in materials or services. Without a well managed change control process the result will be unapproved increase in cost and/or time.

The cure: Implement a rigorous change control process that has clear rules for requesting approval for change. Depending on the degree of change, the process and rules may have to cater for more than one level of approval such as what can be authorised by the project manager, the project board, the steering committee, the board of directors.

8. Business benefits are not realised:

Factors here include the benefits have not been identified accurately at the onset of the projects, the project has drifted from its original objectives, the benefits were unrealistic to begin with, or nobody has managed benefits delivery during the project.

The cure: At the inception stage, sufficient time must be given to identifying ALL benefits and gaining agreement (from the sponsor, stakeholders, etc) that they are real and achievable. Once the project is underway any change in scope must address the impact on benefits delivery. During the project benefits delivery must be tracked and reported on – it's easy to give benefits delivery scant attention amongst the rest of the frantic project activity but without understanding if benefits are being achieved how can the project be judged a success?

9. Unrealistic expectations:

It's easy to sit around a table and justify a project by identifying benefits, which are no more than personal opinions or educated guesses. It's also easy for a sponsor to use their position in an organisation to force a business case through that has little credence. Examples such as these will probably result in the project never meeting expectations.

The cure: When building the business case for project approval, it is vital to thoroughly analyse what the project will deliver and whether the deliverables are achievable and worth the time and money to be spent – especially if other projects are in competition for the funding and resources.

10. Project communication is ineffective:

A major cause of project failure, communications are so critical to the success of the project. Keeping all parties informed of all aspects of the project at the right time, using the right media, making the messages well timed and understandable is key. It's so easy to focus on delivery and keep stakeholders, etc in the dark. Communications is often seen as the poor relative of the project. Anyone can do it and often the claim, so why not give it to the project office and when they have some spare time (which is never!) they can communicate.

The cure: Always appoint an *experienced* Project Communications Manager whose sole responsibility is to produce a communications plan and an associated comprehensive programme of communications material. Ensure the project sponsor and Steering Committee buy into and sign off the plan and programme – ensure they also participate in communicating to all parties with a vested interest in the project.

11. The project plan is incomplete and not managed:

It is easy to go through the motions of producing a very detailed plan just to satisfy a project methodology. The plan could have omissions, dates that bear no resemblance to reality, etc. Once written, the plan is never referred to, it is not amended to take account of revised dates, has no sense of ownership, etc. It's not worth the paper it is written on.

The cure: Without a realistic plan a project will falter at best, fail at worst. To avert such potential disaster it is essential to have a project office that contains the appropriate planning skills to support the project manager in the compilation and ongoing management of the project plan.

12. Project reporting is lacking

Like the project plan, inadequate reporting on progress, risks, issues, costs, change control, benefits realisation, etc will result in loss of control within the team, a dissatisfied sponsor and loss of stakeholder confidence in the project's ability to deliver.

The cure: Adherence to a recognised project management methodology will greatly help. However, as well as satisfying the reporting requirements within the project team, it is important to understand and agree the reporting requirements of all stakeholders (this includes the project board and steering committee).

13. There is no contingency:

A project plan is a best estimate (based on experience, knowledge and skill) to identify tasks, timescales, resources and budget. Estimates can be wrong either because a specific task has not been performed before or something unforeseen is encountered along the way. To cater for this a contingency is required for any task that lacks sufficient information to be deemed acceptably accurate.

The cure: Examine all activities/tasks and identify those that do not have the degree of estimating accuracy you content with. Based on past experience for such activities, agree the appropriate contingency (not forgetting there may be other projects you can refer to that have undertaken similar tasks – you could use their estimates or actual time/cost to base yours on).

14. Lack of resources:

This can result from poor planning, contention for resources, or unavailability of the right skills. Even worse, it could be caused by an organisation ignoring the need for the right number of resources – “ a just get on with it” attitude.

The cure: This problem can only be overcome if the project sponsor accepts the estimates for project resources and makes sure they are provided when they are required. If the project scope changes and more resources are needed then the sponsor must recognise this and obtain them.

15. Team skills are weak:

Even though the project team resources have been provided, they are not all of the right calibre and the project suffers.

The cure: Although it's never easy to resource every project with the right level of skills and experience, every effort must be made to get the right people – especially for business critical projects. Organisations must recognise that project expertise cannot be plucked indiscriminately from within the company – projects will only be successful if the resources are up to the job. This means proper recognised training and accreditation together on the job skills and experience. As well as project competence this includes knowledge of the business and operational methods/processes.

16. Scope is not well defined or creeps

A project is started without a clear scope (perhaps caused by pressure to get on with it); only as the project makes progress is the real scope revealed. Alternatively, the scope is well defined and agreed but new requirements appear and are taken on board without any change control – unauthorised scope creep appears.

The cure: Simple, really. Never begin a project until the scope is well understood, agreed and signed off. All change to scope must be subject to an approved change control process.

17. Risk management is poor:

Identifying and managing risks are often seen as a real chore. However, ignoring risk analysis and management is at your peril – if you do you will be inviting potential disaster for the project caused by events that should have been identified as a risk.

The cure: At the beginning of the project run a risk workshop to identify all risks, agree the probability and impact and mitigating actions and owners. Review each risk and mitigating action every week. Constantly look out for new risks and subject them to the same risk management process.

18. Quality is lacking:

Although everyone is working hard and progress is being made, there is no consistency to methods, processes, procedures, documents, controls, etc. The result is quality suffers.

The cure: Produce an agreed Quality Plan at the outset of the project. The plan should identify who is responsible for quality, all facets of the project that are subject to quality, quality standards for project methodology, processes (e.g. change control, risk management) and associated procedures, documentation, etc, the criteria on which quality is judged to be successfully applied, the quality review process.

19. Impending failure is treated with additional budget, staff etc

Lack of expected progress, not achieving objectives or delivering benefits has been resolved by throwing more resources and money at it. The project is floundering.

The cure: It goes without saying that adequate project management would never allow this situation to occur. However, if it has and urgent attention is needed to address what appears to be a project about to fail. A project audit should be conducted to review all elements of the project and identify what has gone wrong and recommend a course of action that can range from saving the project to terminating it.

20. Poor relationships (within the team, with stakeholders, with suppliers, with the client)

This can be caused by low morale in the project team, poor team spirit, no proper interaction with stakeholders, not taking time to establish proper working relationships with suppliers and clients – or a combination of these. The result will invariably adversely affect the project in many ways.

The cure: Projects are team affairs. The team includes not just the project team but all players - stakeholders, clients, suppliers, etc. The Project Manager must create strong rapport with this wider team and the team members must reflect this rapport with each other. Trust amongst all parties must be established, roles and responsibilities must be defined and agreed, first class communications are essential.

21. Culture resistance/lack of buy in from users:

Even with the best project team in the world, obvious benefits, strenuous efforts to build relationships with everyone, if users do not want to buy in to what you are delivering the

project will falter or fail. Whether this is caused by change that the users' culture is not ready to accept, or caused by sheer bloody-mindedness (culture again?), if users resist you are in trouble.

The cure: Projects must understand the culture in which the project will deliver. It can be a painstaking task but it must be done. This understanding must also be gained early in the project (ideally at the inception process). Similarly, the user population must be understood. If the project truly is delivering benefits to the users then the case must be strong enough to convince users (communications again). It is important to obtain support from the project sponsor, and departmental heads in this quest to get the user community on your side.

22. No project board and/or steering committee:

A project without a project board or steering committee is a project without teeth. Without these 2 bodies the project will have limited authority and may be subject to resistance from many forms (politics, lack of support from departmental managers, etc).

The cure: Ensure these bodies are established at the outset of the project. The project board provides the Project Manager with regular guidance and decision making for all aspects of the projects (helping to form strategy and policy, change requests, risk management, scope change, etc). Ideally it should be chaired by the project sponsor and include the Project Manager, a senior user representative(s) and the supplier. The steering committee provides a higher level of guidance and support to the project board and signs off anything requiring executive level approval. As a minimum, this body should be chaired by a senior executive and include the project board.