

So you think you can get your programme on track?

Every couple of years since the mid-90s, the Standish Group has produced the Chaos Report – an analysis of IT project success rates across the public and private sectors, mainly in the USA. The report categorises projects as having one of three outcomes:

- **Success.** The project is completed on time and on budget, offering all features and functions as initially specified.
- **Challenged.** The project is completed and operational but over budget and over the time estimate, and offers fewer features and functions than originally specified.
- **Impaired.** The project is cancelled at some point during the development cycle and/or completely fails to deliver.

In the first survey in 1994, only 16% of projects were judged to have been a success, 53% challenged and 31% failed completely. 15 years later, in 2009, the situation had improved somewhat with 32% successful, 44% challenged and only 24% complete failures – still a rather sorry tale. Lest you think that this is predominantly a US problem, a cross-sector survey commissioned by the UK government in 2003 found that “only 13% of all IT projects, and less than 1% of IT development projects, were successful (on time, to specification and to cost).” All this during the rise of formal programme management approaches such as PRINCE2. In these and other surveys a key factor identified was the lack of effective engagement between business management and the IT function.

And before you say “well, that’s IT – what do you expect?” – at least the outcomes of those projects were reasonably quantifiable. If you were to turn the microscope onto your recent, current or planned business change programmes would they fare any better? How many major programmes are based on a high level “business case”, big on strategic impact and light on financial benefits? With somewhat nebulous planned outcomes, many programmes start to drift. It’s hard to spot when they go past the point where they have completely lost their way and concerns tend only to come to light with a change in management.

So the questions you need to ask yourself now are:

- Are we on track?
- And if not (be honest!), am I confident I know how we are going to get back on course before it’s too late?

It’s easy to lose sight of the fact that just as you need to design the end state that your business is aiming for, you also need to properly design the programme that is going to get you there. If you built a house without a detailed design and with no concept of how the structure, plumbing, electrical supply, plastering and finishing had to be combined to deliver the end product envisaged, you may not be surprised by the results.

This is the key: the design of the end business state itself is vital; managing the programme to deliver it requires special skills and techniques – but this isn’t the whole story. The design, or architecture, of the programme of change itself is just as important. You need to structure the programme in such a way that no gaps exist, no effort is duplicated, the end state and transition goals are built into the programme of work and there is clarity about how all the components fit together.

So next time you’re sitting in a meeting when what seemed to be vital features of your new business are being de-scoped, or you get the sinking feeling that your impressive Gantt charts and programme plans are taking you in circles or over the edge of a cliff, then you need to think about how you are going to take stock of how far adrift you are and take the opportunity to realign your programme.

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