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Why Project Management Implementation Programs Fail: *Taking Shortcuts vs. Diminishing Chances of Success*

“The failures in implementing PM can be traced back to this misconception: that we can take shortcuts with PM -- that we can treat it casually and unprofessionally -- and still have it work”

In my experience in working with corporate clients wishing to implement a computer-based PM capability I have found the satisfaction level to be very low. While we can easily attribute much of this to lack of adequate participation by the user, we can't get off the hook that easily. We need to ask why this participation level is so low and what we can do to improve it.

As in any business venture, the typical consultant will experience a wide range of success (or failure) in his various engagements. While some of the shortfalls can be attributed, at least in part, to the consultant, there are often major failures on the part of the client. Much of this can be categorized as lack of sound communication and/or inability to have a practical vision.

The purpose of this paper is not so much as to place blame, but to share the lessons of these experiences. "He who fails to learn from his mistakes is doomed to repeat them". For this paper, I have focused on engagements that involve the objective of implementing a computer-based project management capability in organizations that did not have such a capability or had a very rudimentary system that was deemed inadequate.

Reflecting on personal consulting experience in working with corporate clients wishing to implement a computer-based PM capability, I often find the following typical sequence:

1. Client expresses desire/need to know what is going on - when work is to be done - what people are working on - what the impact of new projects are on the firm's resources, etc.
2. Client wants to get people to plan their work, communicate the deliverable dates and other project info, and control the effort (somewhere in line with the published plans).
3. Client does not have a PM methodology in place and resists the imposition of too much "structure". Simple front-end practices, such as a project charter do not exist.
4. Client is unwilling to integrate key components, such as Operations, Finance, Human Resources, Projects, and Line Management.
5. Client comes up with extensive list of selection criteria for sophisticated tool support of nonexistent practices. Makes major effort to review candidate products, via purchase of reports, extensive staff research, and/or use of consultants. Invites sales presentations and proposals from several tool vendors.

6. Client will not establish a Project Office or designate personnel as responsible for PM. Client will not establish PM as "a way of life" in the firm, or make support of PM a "condition of employment". Reference to PM responsibilities does not exist in anyone's position guide.
7. Client terminates program to implement a computer-based PM capability. Or, if client does "buy" a product, fails to educate users and otherwise support the process.
8. Client determines that the failure to accomplish the goal is due to the demanding nature of PM and PM tools ... requiring a structure and level of effort exceeding that considered to be reasonable.

In all fairness, we must admit that there is some truth in the last item. Project Management, although based entirely on a set of common-sense approaches, is structured and demanding. And even the best of breed in PM tools will require some education and compliance in order to produce usable results. However, I do not find these demands to be unreasonable. As in most things, there is an investment required if one is to gain the desired payoff.

With this in mind, let's expand the above list to see what we can do to make the implementation of a computer-based project management capability a positive and rewarding experience.

1. *Client expresses desire/need to know what is going on - when work is to be done - what people are working on - what the impact of new projects are on the firm's resources, etc.*
2. *Client wants to get people to plan their work, communicate the deliverable dates and other project info, and control the effort (somewhere in line with the published plans).*
 - These two items represent the identification of the need for a computer-based project management capability. There is a recognition that something is either missing or inadequate. What is important is that the wish list be kept practical. It must be consistent with the ability to realistically support the desired result and it must recognize the organizational culture. True, a strong leader can bring about changes in the culture, but I have found it to be rare for top management to go to the wall to institute major change for the purposes of implementing modern project management.
 - Change, even simple change, should be deliberate, as part of a strategy.

3. *Client does not have a PM methodology in place and resists the imposition of too much "structure". Simple front-end practices, such as a project charter do not exist.*
 - ❑ The implementation of a computer-based project management capability has two major components. The first is the identification of a project management methodology. The automation of that methodology comes next, but only after the first has been accomplished.
4. *Client is unwilling to integrate key components, such as Operations, Finance, Human Resources, Projects, and Line Management.*
 - ❑ Managing projects is a subset of managing the business. The strategies that drive the projects and the conditions that impact upon the projects involve other components of the enterprise. Success cannot be achieved without full participation and cooperation of these business components.
5. *Client comes up with extensive list of selection criteria for sophisticated tool support of nonexistent practices. Makes major effort to review candidate products, via purchase of reports, extensive staff research, and/or use of consultants. Invites sales presentations and proposals from several tool vendors.*
 - ❑ We all know that the purchase of a violin does not turn a layman into a musician. Then how can anyone believe that the acquisition of a PM tool would automatically position that organization to be fully PM competent, complete with practices, policies and procedures? No! The PM tool is acquired to automate a set of PM practices. While the tools can be helpful in clarifying the PM structure and practices, it does not actually create them.
6. *Client will not establish a Project Office or designate personnel as responsible for PM. Client will not establish PM as "a way of life" in the firm, or make support of PM a "condition of employment". Reference to PM responsibilities does not exist in anyone's position guide.*
 - ❑ The establishment of a PM capability starts with top-down direction and requires the full diligence and support of senior management. In sponsoring and taking command of the PM implementation, the CEO creates an environment where PM is a thoroughly integrated and ingrained into the organization, and the staff understands their requirement to support PM.
 - ❑ PM is a special discipline. Many people can participate in PM, but only specially trained and experienced people can be experts. PM cannot be successful unless a central component is established and staffed with such experts. The PM Office is a single point of policy direction and PM mentoring. Its leadership and expertise helps to make PM a successful

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endeavor.

7. *Client terminates program to implement a computer-based PM capability. Or, if client does "buy" a product, fails to educate users and otherwise support the process.*
 - ❑ By this time, the sponsors of the PM initiative realize the full scope and requirements of the program. If they haven't yet made the commitment, they often decide that they are not willing to make the investment in organization, policy, manpower, and procedures -- as well as in tools and training.
 - ❑ If the purchase has been made, they fail to follow up with all of the things that are needed to make it work -- and the initiative fails.
 - ❑ A successful program to implement computer-based project management starts with a realistic set of objectives, that are consistent with the firm's needs, culture, and strategies, and winds up with a supportable commitment at all levels.

8. *Client determines that the failure to accomplish the goal is due to the demanding nature of PM and PM tools ... requiring a structure and level of effort exceeding that considered to be reasonable.*
 - ❑ This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is not the tools that require this structure and level of effort. It is the entire program of project management that calls for this. It is no different than any other professional discipline. Whether it be engineering, finance, R&D, manufacturing, etc., we expect that there will be leadership, organization, policies and practices, and expertise. We should expect no less for PM.

The failures in implementing PM can be traced back to this misconception: that we can take shortcuts with PM -- that we can treat it casually and unprofessionally.

Harvey A. Levine, with 38 years of service to the project management industry, is founder of **The Project Knowledge Group**, a consulting firm specializing in PM training, PM software selection, evaluation & implementation, and PM using microcomputers.

He has implemented or enhanced the project management capabilities of numerous firms, often combined with the selection or implementation of computerized project management tools. Mr. Levine is considered the leading consultant to the project management software industry and is recognized as the leading expert in tools for project management.

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