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IT Project Management Practice

# ARE YOUR IT PROJECT MANAGERS COSTING YOUR ORGANISATION MILLIONS?

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We believe that the current view of best practice in IT Project Management is flawed. As a consequence, failing to rectify the situation can add millions to an organisations cost base. There is a myriad of things that can go wrong when replacing a core system. However, if the training, tools, practices and disciplines that are deemed best practice for project managers [PM's] are fundamentally flawed and failing organisations, then the situation is greatly and dangerously exacerbated.

The key to successful IT Project Implementation, is to develop a dynamic system of processes and practices that can quickly and effectively respond to constantly emerging risks. Some experienced PM's break the 'rule book' and intuitively intervene in the delivery of a project in a way that prevents disaster. Such PM's are the treasured few. For the most part the moves they make and the actions they take are instinctive; ask them to give their thinking for why and when they intervened and they will struggle to explain themselves.

In this article we describe and codify some of these 'intuitive' interventions and explain the rationale for their use. Our aim is to show that there is an alternative way to manage large enterprise wide IT

implementations and in the process, save organisation millions of dollars of cost and substantially reduce project risk.

Our findings are based on interviews with Ennovate's Directors in which we capture their experience of project managing dozens of separate IT implementations across Europe and Ennovate's experience of providing a project recovery and client-side advisory service for enterprise-wide system integration.

Ennovate's approach to IT Project Management is to:

1. Develop a single page project view of the Project that is simple and easy for all to understand and to avoid the tendency to manage the implementation at task level.
2. Create short and real milestones every 6-8 weeks. We believe that this is essential to achieving high levels of productivity.
3. Set-up a project ownership structure with single owners and develop a direct style of meeting practice that focuses on owners' reporting exceptions. Ennovate's approach to IT Project Implementation is to use these meetings to design real-time corrective interventions.

**“The key to success is to ensure your project managers are capable of coaching and mentoring their team to take personal accountability and pride in their contribution”**

4. Design and implement early prototyping by getting business stakeholders to own usability designs and gain their early participation in prototyping. Ennovate's aim here is to move the technical team out of a mindset of perfect build and test and into one of learning together.
5. Encourage project conflict. If managed well and all stakeholders are made to focus on the project goals, encouraging project conflict is a powerful method of keeping the project real and promoting the necessary pragmatic trade-offs.
6. Avoid the natural desire to over-specify and resist complexity. Both users and technical staff need to be managed away from this inherent tendency.
7. Facilitate changing scope by ensuring project goals remain alive in the project yet promote pragmatic negotiation of scope as part of the project delivery.

In summary, we advocate promoting a candid style of project management. This is one that seeks commitments and clarity at every opportunity and does not tolerate behaviour that deflects from the projects overall goals. A sharp focus on the projects final outcome is maintained and individuals are coached and mentored to take personal accountability and pride in their contribution.

1. **Develop a Single Page Project View**  
Large IT projects have a typical pattern starting with business requirements and then going through technical design, build and configure, various iterations of testing, migration and ending with user acceptance. Each phase involves tasks and assigning task ownership. Typically, reporting focuses on progress at task level

with some level of interpretation during the aggregation process required for summary reporting. This approach, deemed best practice by project management authorities, does not take care of the problems with interpretation and aggregation, nor does it lend itself to keeping a simple coherent view of the project that all project members can understand and relate to.

Our approach, based upon Commitment-based Management is different. We focus on building a top down, single page view of the project. First we develop a unifying project goal and maintain this throughout the project. We work with the project team to design their promises and help them relate to and understand how they contribute towards the project goal. This results in a simplified programme structure with clear accountability and commitment to the projects success. Reporting focuses on how the team are doing against managing their promises and the actions required to keep, renegotiate or support each other in delivering upon such promises. In doing so, the project is focused on the future, maintains simplicity and unity to the overall project goal. Another outcome is that the project reporting requirements are simplified and the work of the project office moves from simply reporting and interpreting progress to value adding activities such as supporting the team in managing the delivery of their commitments.

2. **Real Milestones every 6-8 Weeks**  
Projects with a six-month-plus duration and a large and diverse range of interested parties, have a difficult time maintaining the momentum and energy of all involved. This can mean milestones are fudged resulting in the erosion

of trust between the project team and their stakeholders.

Our approach builds upon a project team that understands the overall project goal and how its promises are part of that goal. Ennovate then design and plan 6-8 week milestone deliverables. In addition, we introduce an operational meeting practice that focuses on the commitments pending and actions required to safe-guard them or re-negotiate them. In doing this, the project team focus on outcomes required from each milestone and maintain high energy levels and conviction.

### 3. **Promote an honest and straight talking meeting practice**

In our experience all projects have a tendency to slide into working in silos. When teams operate in silos they move away from having a clear goal of the greater project good and look to focus on their own deliverables. The sum of their deliverables inevitably falls short of the required overall project goal. The team fragments, with each deliverable competing for limited resources. Project managers and leaders can fall into the trap of refereeing or making priority calls based on the strongest personality's representation. Furthermore, this tendency, when it extends to the business community, creates additional work. Users begin to focus predominately on their own needs and end up specifying nice-to-have requirements in the name of future proofing. This leads to unnecessary workload and unnecessary development effort which results in spiralling implementation risk.

In Ennovate's experience, the typical response to this situation is a generic cry for charismatic leadership. This is helpful, but does not ensure success in preventing silos from emerging.

Our approach is to get the project team to maintain focus on the overall project goal. Our

operational meeting practice provides a process of renegotiating commitments / promises and is a practical way of ensuring that the team is in regular dialogue on the projects goals, the interdependency of their promise on others and vice versa.

### 4. **Encourage Business Stakeholders prototyping as early as possible**

IT Projects based upon the traditional project management frameworks, are designed and implemented in a way, where the requirements are handed-off to project technical team members and little is heard from the development team until they are ready for the users to re-engage at acceptance phase. This approach generates a number of risks, one of which is that the business moves on and the original requirements are no longer relevant. Business users compensate for this situation by putting forward extensive and very often, unnecessary requirements, while technology delivery teams build completely over-engineered solutions. The consequence is additional time and risk introduced into the project with the likelihood that the business community begins to lose interest in the project. The challenge here is how do you maintain business community commitment and prevent this from happening?

Ennovate's approach is to bring the business into the project. We introduce a dynamic change management practice through the design and build phase and maintain a practical perspective on requirements and changing business needs. In addition, we look to push through an end-to-end transaction early in the project cycle. This sharpens the overall project deliverables and gets the business community meaningfully engaged earlier in the process. This also gets the users and core project team focused on real issues that can be resolved pragmatically.

5. **Promote Project Conflict** Projects tend to be a microcosm of the organisational structure and represent the organisational culture in a magnified way. When things go wrong, which is inevitable, the success in managing such conflict will be critical for getting the project delivered against its goals and time commitments.

Some see conflict as a bad thing, Ennovate do not. Healthy teams bring disagreements and conflict out into the open and deal with it. Our style of working is to encourage openness and candour to get conflict out early and deal with it. Our project teams are trained to deal with conflict and listen to the breakdowns in order to design constructive exchanges that help re-align the team to their stated goals. In fact, regularly encouraging disputes to occur and resolving them, quickly adds to the team morale and their sense of creating a real difference.

6. **Resist Complexity** Managing scope, budget and timelines is a mandatory competency for all project leaders and managers. However, the training project managers receive and the commonly held best practice for project risk management, is to eliminate and minimise scope creep. In our experience, this has the opposite effect on managing scope, budget and timelines. For instance, when a project manager receives a new requirement or change request, the project managers natural instincts are to encourage the functional designer to over specify, conservatively estimate effort and scope and negotiate to eliminate as many changes as possible. The result of this situation is extra redundancy in scope, an unwillingness to accept change and an emerging distrust between the users and the project team.

We see budget, timelines and scope as a series of commitments that

need to be negotiated and managed throughout the project. Our focus on managing these commitments are forward looking. By getting the users to work with the project team and make commitments by giving them a forum to discuss in the various meeting practices, we keep the project alive to the concerns of the customers. This approach minimises wasteful, non-value add activities that have a tendency to creep into projects based on the emergence of distrust between the various stakeholder communities. The result is a project implementation that delivers the business benefits at the minimum effort and cost.

7. **Promote Pragmatic Negotiations and Scope Changes**

The success in all projects boils down to the team's effectiveness in managing change. The commonly held view in project management is to get buy-in from all parties and negotiate change through a series of change control practices that escalate upwards to a steering group based on the impact on project scope, budget and timeline. As mentioned above, project managers are risk adverse by nature and see change as a potential threat to the project's success. In fact, some even get territorial and fanatical about maintaining the status quo, i.e. make a strong case for minimising change.

Ennovates view is different. Our team is trained to see that changes are necessary to a projects success and introduce ways of managing change through negotiation with all stakeholders, building trust in the process. When this happens, change becomes part of the mind-set of the project team. Only changes that are required by the business will be proposed, the opportunity to remove requirements that are no longer necessary will exist and costs associated with managing change will be minimised. In fact, pragmatic trade-offs that swap one

requirement for another is key to successful implementations and results in reduced effort and cost. Such change management practices will help ensure that the project delivers upon its commitments in an effective and efficient manner.

In summary, do not be afraid to ask any system integration partner to tell you about their success rate and do be prepared to probe behind their answers. The truth may surprise you, provided you get to it! What the project management industry does not tell you is that replacing a core system never goes to plan, will cost more than your most generous estimates and demolish any contingency you might have, causing huge business disruption in the process. Ennovate's approach and experience tells us that we can dramatically reduce this risk.

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