Forget the Cookie Cutter Approach to Project Management

Why doesn't the cookie cutter approach work as a guarantee of project management success?

~ By Duncan Haughey

Some people believe there is an instant approach to project management one that guarantees success. Just deploy this approach and 'hey presto', successful projects! Sadly, this is untrue.

Project management theory and reality are quite different. There is no one method or approach that guarantees success. Each project must be set up and managed on a case-by-case basis. The basic project management framework and process steps hold true: starting with project initiation and then planning, monitoring, control, and then ending in closure. How you deal with each of these phases and what you do during each phase needs careful consideration for every project.

Many organisations invest heavily in adopting methodologies – such as PRINCE2 (PRojects IN Controlled Environments) – and although this does not guarantee success, it ensures that everyone in the organisation is working from a standard approach. There is nothing wrong with this; however, I still meet managers who believe this route alone will result in sustained project success.

These managers often end up disappointed. They are missing the vital experience that comes from years of managing projects. For this reason, the Project Management Institute (PMI) requires 4,500 hours of project management experience as the entry criteria to their Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. Here is the project management paradox: New and aspiring project managers cannot get a project management job because they lack experience, but they cannot gain experience without being given a job.

So, how do organisations improve their chances of project success?

The major problem with adopting a methodology is that organisations soon become dependent on them – slaves to the methodology instead of using their own judgement and experience.
Organisations need a sustainable approach to project management training so when people move on, the people who follow are trained, and the organisation is not reinventing the project management approach all over again. The following is the best way to accomplish this:

1. Employ a mix of senior and junior project managers. Use the senior project managers to coach the junior project managers. New entrants to an organisation are usually enthusiastic and keen to learn, so they quickly absorb knowledge from their more experienced colleagues.

2. Pick a methodology (such as PRINCE2 or SCRUM) as the basis of your organisational project management approach. If you choose a public methodology, there are plenty of cost-effective training courses available. Adapt the methodology to suit your organisational needs. Above all, remember to use your own judgement and experience to avoid becoming a slave to the methodology.

3. Develop a toolkit that allows project managers to control projects. Provide training in its use. The toolkit should contain the project management process, templates, sample project plans, example status reports, and other material useful to project managers. This way, you will have a standard, consistent approach to project management within your organisation.

Forget the cookie cutter approach to project management and don’t listen to anyone who says there’s a simple off-the-shelf solution to project management success. There are no instant formulas or silver bullets that guarantee consistent project success! Instead, develop an approach that suits your organisation, with a mix of senior and junior project managers, coaching, an organisational toolkit, and high-quality project management training. This is the route to long-lasting, sustainable project success.