Avoiding the Project Management Obstacle Course

By Duncan Haughey

Let's get straight to the point that project management by form filling is ineffective for managing projects. These days many organisations and individual's whole project management strategy revolves around becoming slaves to a methodology. Don't get me wrong, there are many great methodologies, and they all have their part to play, but it's not the be-all and end-all of project management.

If you give a complete novice a set of project management templates and ask him to complete them, does he suddenly become a fully-fledged project manager? Of course not. He would lack the people and interpersonal skills required to succeed for a start. Why is it that so many organisations think introducing a methodology will solve their problems? In my experience, there is no silver bullet solution, just solutions that help the project manager to do his job better.

"The success of any project is crucially dependent on the documents produced for it."

-John Rakos

My worst experiences have been with organisations that stick blindly to a methodology, regardless of the value. *"It says you fill out this form at this stage, and we're jolly well going to fill it in."* Then the form invariably gets filed away and never looked at again.

This approach leads to a perception of methodologies as needlessly bureaucratic, which, when used appropriately, they are not. I'm a great advocate of starting projects well, spending time on the planning phase, defining the scope, assessing the risks and getting stakeholder buy-in.

Here, the typical project brief adds tremendous value in establishing clarity in the stakeholders' minds about what the project will and won't deliver. There lies the critical issue; can you demonstrate a clear benefit of having a particular document or process.

For organisations to move away from this needlessly bureaucratic project management obstacle course, they must first trust their project managers and keep them accountable for the project outcome. The project manager must use his discretion to decide on a project by project basis what is and isn't appropriate from any methodology they use.

If any element of the methodology lacks value, don't do it, but be prepared to back up your decision with a well thought out reason.

Methodologies are a framework in which to work, not a solution to project management. Spend time finding out what works for you and your organisation, discard what doesn't and modify what's left to fulfil your needs better. That way, you will avoid adding unnecessary overhead to projects and having your preferred methodology dismissed as needlessly bureaucratic.

Here are some of the signs that may indicate your current methodology isn't working:

- Customers complain about form filling

- Project managers do not follow the process

- Project management cost is disproportionate compared with the total cost of the project

- Completing all the documents and steps in the methodology is a crucial measure of success

- The following of the process is valued more highly than project success

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The Project Management Office

Setting up a Project Management Office seems to be very fashionable. However, many organisations are struggling to define what it is this office will do. In the worst cases I've seen, the Project Management Office is an autocratic policeman. Their role involves waiting for unsuspecting project managers and jumping on them when they deviate from the straight and narrow. In the best cases, they support project managers and teams by organising project data, providing statistical information and reducing the admin overhead.

Use your Project Management Office as a policeman, and resentment will soon build up. Use it to support project managers and their teams proactively, and it will become a valuable and essential asset.

Here are some of the activities that a Project Management Office usually undertake:

- Compiling and publishing statistical information

- Providing decision support information for senior management

- Communicating policies and procedures

- Updating and maintaining templates

- Initial project set-up

- Project filing

- Maintaining best practice

- Training

- Quality assurance

- Recruiting staff

- Maintaining a skills inventory

- Timesheet administration

To return to the title of this article, *"avoiding the project management obstacle course,"* organisations should ensure that project managers aren't overburdened with a process that doesn't add value, just for the sake of adhering to a particular methodology. If your project managers must fill in forms, get them signed in triplicate and wait weeks for approval to start a project, you are putting them through the project management obstacle course. You are preventing your organisation from becoming an effective and project-focused enterprise.