

## Programme management – a cautionary tale.

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**Adrian Dooley, chairman of The Projects Group plc, told The Network delegates that we rush into programme management at our peril.**

After eight years in construction and IT project management, I started out in consultancy and training about 14 years ago. The mid-eighties were heady days for project management. The availability of PC's and a wide variety of planning packages resulted in thousands of companies deciding that project management was going to be the solution to all their woes.

There were two problems: the first was that lots of ill-prepared or ill-informed people jumped on the bandwagon. On more than one occasion I turned up to a customer's office to help them implement a package like SuperProject or Microsoft Project only to find that what they wanted to do was not project planning at all. People were only too ready to believe the hype.

The second problem was that those who did need project management, confused it with project planning and therefore assumed that a project planning package enabled them to manage projects. Many's the time a rather bemused middle manager would turn up on a course and, when asked what his objectives were, would simply say "My Boss gave me this piece of software and told me I'm now a Project Manager".

Fortunately those days have gone. We now live in a world of Project Management Maturity Models, Bodies of Knowledge and more qualifications in project management than you can shake a stick at! We have learned our lessons. We now take a more holistic view. We understand the big picture and can make projects work.

Or do we?

In 1992, the first CCTA Guide to Programme Management was published in response to the many problems that Government was experiencing in managing major multidisciplinary projects such as privatisations.

The year before last saw the publication of *Managing Successful Programmes (MSP)*<sup>1</sup>, which the CCTA hopes will prove as popular as the *PRINCE*<sup>2</sup> method for projects.

It's early days but are we in danger of perceiving Programme Management as some form of panacea in the same way that Project Management was 15 years ago? I hope not, but I have seen some worrying signs. A while ago, I was asked to run a *Managing Successful Programmes* qualification course for a large FT 100 company. Eight people were sent on the course. Some had never been involved in programmes and struggled with the concepts of MSP. They failed the Practitioner Exam. As a result, the company questioned whether they needed programme management or not.

Clearly, the use of programme management (whether the MSP flavour or some other) is a strategic business decision and should not be based on whether a randomly selected bunch of people pass an exam or not.

This is not something to rush into without due consideration. The first thing to decide is exactly what do we mean by programme management. Judging by the papers at last year's IPMA Congress we are at least ahead of the rest of the world in this respect.

I would suggest that there are two fundamental elements that make something a programme: co-ordination of projects and management of benefits. In dealing with these two elements, programmes should fill the gap between Business Strategy and Projects.

### **New technologies**

Take a look at a hot topic of the moment, e-commerce. Many companies are building e-commerce into their business strategies. But developing an e-commerce business is about much more than just creating a Web Site. As well as developing a site, there can be supply chain, security, organisational change and support issues to consider. Projects may be set up for each of these and, as we all know, they will find themselves competing for resources as well providing deliverables to each other. This multi-project co-ordination is an essential part of, but not unique to, programmes. No business project works in total isolation.

The way projects are traditionally set up, they deliver a product to an agreed time, cost and quality - if you're lucky. The project team is then off to the next exciting challenge! The business is left with a 'capability' (to borrow some terminology from MSP). A capability could be a new IT System, a new building or a new organisation structure. But this product of the project does not create benefits for the business simply by its existence. Somebody has to take that capability and do something with it in order to produce a benefit.

### **Good management**

Co-ordinating projects and managing the capabilities to produce benefits is, for me, the essence of programmes. By doing both of these things we provide the missing link between the business ideas and strategy at the top of the organisation, and the project deliverables at the other. Good programme management should make best use of your resources to perform multiple projects and ensure that you achieve measurable benefits in line with your business strategy.

I hope you achieve both of those goals without getting your fingers burnt first, because you won't find the answer in a book or a piece of software.

Latest versions of references:

1. Axelos (2014), *Managing Successful Programmes*, TSO, Norwich
2. Axelos (2014), *PRINCE2*, TSO, Norwich