

Why projects fail.



These slides and notes are a transcript of the presentation I gave at Eddie Obeng's 'Conference Zero' in the QUBE virtual environment.

Unfortunately, as you'll see from the 'away' above my head, I'd slipped out for five minutes when this screen shot was taken.

**Create a world where
all projects succeed?**

Change the culture!

Adrian Dooley

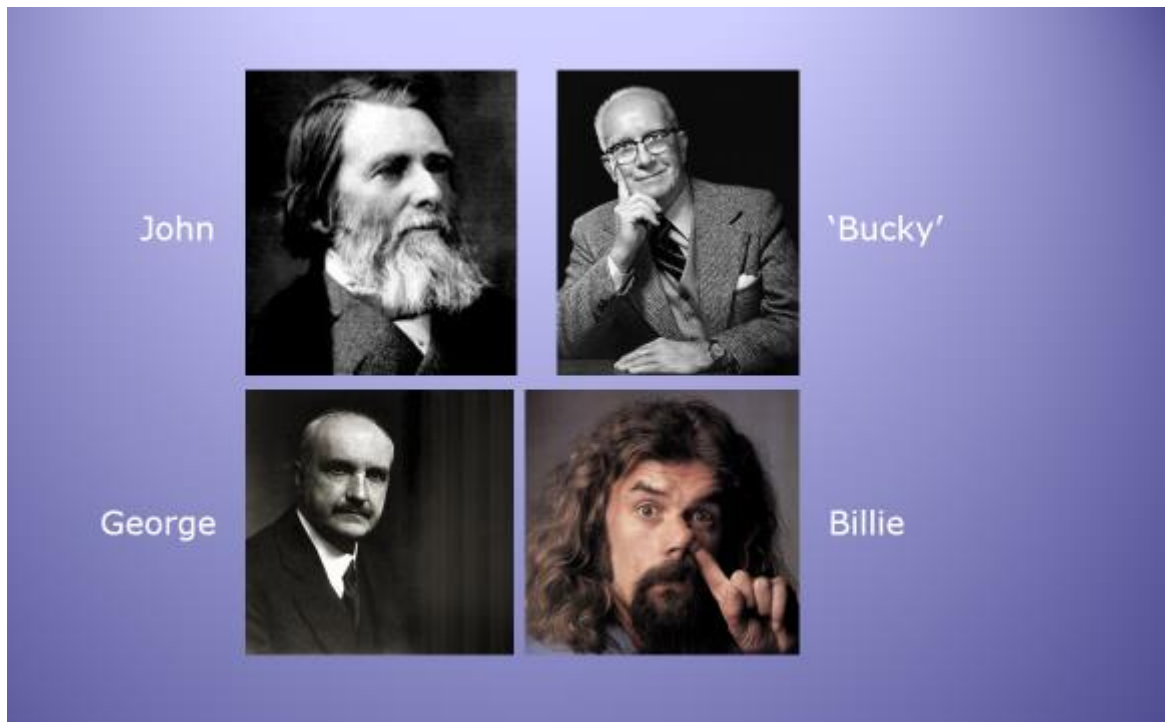
Good morning everyone.

I suspect like me most of you are new to this virtual environment. So this is going to be interesting. I will be happy to take questions as we go. If nothing else it will help remind me that

I'm not just sat in my study just talking to a screen. Some interaction will help me a great deal so please don't be shy. I have a minder, Leonardo, who is much more proficient than I at the workings of QUBE (say hello Leonardo) and he will do all he can to help me and make things go smoothly.

In the APM's strategy for the year 2020 they aim for a "a world where all projects succeed". An admirable aim – but is it possible?

It's certainly worth striving for but to have any hope of achieving it I believe we need to bring about some fairly radical cultural change.



To help with my arguments I shall enlist the help of four of the western world's great thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries:

The English artist, critic, philanthropist and philosopher, John Ruskin

The American architect, author, designer and futurist, Buckminster (Bucky) Fuller

The Spanish essayist, poet and philosopher George Santayana

and, of course, the incomparable Scottish actor, comedian and social observer, Billie Connolly

But before we look at their pearls of wisdom, I'd like to ask you a question.

A presentation slide with a purple gradient background. On the left, there is a bulleted list of 10 reasons why projects fail. On the right, there is a photograph of the Pantheon in Rome, showing its iconic portico with columns and the dome.

- Unrealistic expectations
- Unclear or inadequate requirements
- Lack of senior management support
- Insufficient or excessive planning
- Lack of resources
- Ill-considered changes
- Lack of end user input
- Insufficient or excessive control
- Poor delegation and supervision
- Poor or non-existent project closure



Whenever a magazine is looking for a few pages to fill or someone on linkedin has run out of ideas for a useful debate, they ask the question “Why do projects fail?”

People have probably been asking this question for at least 2000 years. Imagine the scene, 732 workers in site for two years when the pillars for the Pantheon turned up from the quarry in Egypt, 10 feet shorter than they should have been. The result was some hasty redesign of the Portico (or Agile project management as we call it today)

Next to my picture of the Pantheon you’ll see a list of 10 common reasons why projects fail. I very much doubt that there is anything there that makes you think “If only I’d known that before my projects would have gone so much better”.

Projects failing because of unrealistic objectives, lack of resource, lack of senior management commitment – these are not rocket science and should be straightforward problems to fix.

So let’s have a look at another list.

- Unrealistic expectations
 - Unclear or inadequate requirements
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 - Insufficient or excessive planning
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My question to you is “What’s the difference?”

Clearly this is something of a trick question and I will admit to taking two published lists and, with a bit of poetic licence, editing them to look the same.

But there is an underlying difference, does anyone have an idea what it might be?



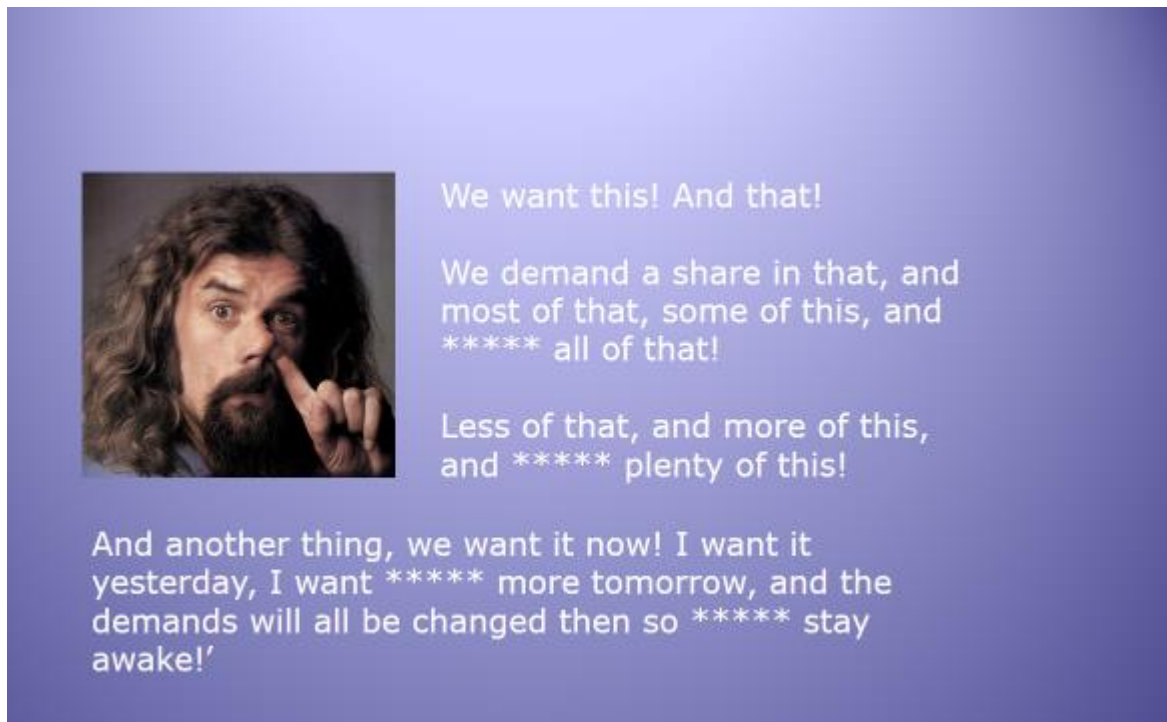
The difference is very simply “40 years”.

At least that’s roughly the time difference between a presentation at the 1972 IPMA conference and a discussion on linkedin last week.

If archeologists ever find the Post-project review from the Pantheon I’ll probably be able to change this slide to 2,000 years.

So why don’t things change? – it’s largely down to some fundamental characteristics of human nature.

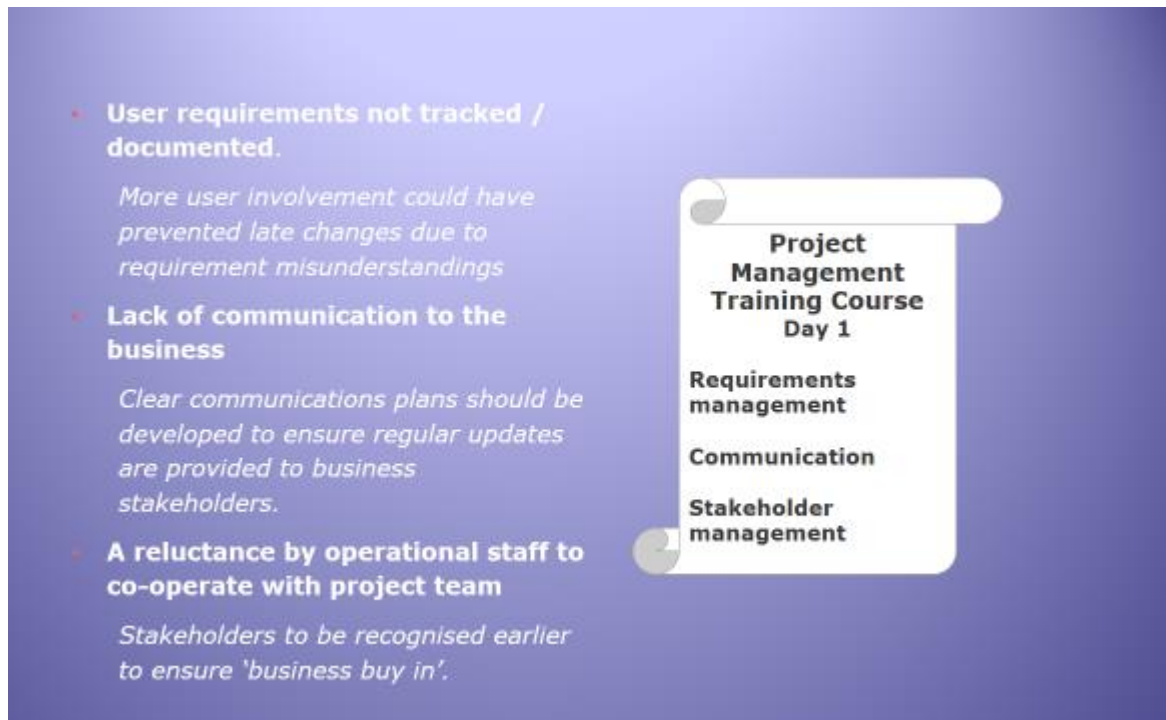
For example, let’s see what our first philosopher has to say about the first item on the list.



You can read this but the impact just isn't there without Billie's delivery and the expletives deleted, if you would like a laugh and are not easily offended, I suggest you have a look on Youtube (search "Billie Connolly, we want this"). You'll see why I couldn't use the clip here today.

I've taken it out of context but it does remind me of a few clients I've known which never gets a project off to a good start.

But what about the rest of the items on our lists, surely project don't really fail for such simple and avoidable reasons.



- **User requirements not tracked / documented.**

More user involvement could have prevented late changes due to requirement misunderstandings
- **Lack of communication to the business**

Clear communications plans should be developed to ensure regular updates are provided to business stakeholders.
- **A reluctance by operational staff to co-operate with project team**

Stakeholders to be recognised earlier to ensure 'business buy in'.

Project Management Training Course Day 1

- Requirements management**
- Communication**
- Stakeholder management**

Here are a few quotes from the lessons learned sections of real post project reviews from a major UK company. I have not played with these at all, they are literal extracts from a company's lessons learned database.

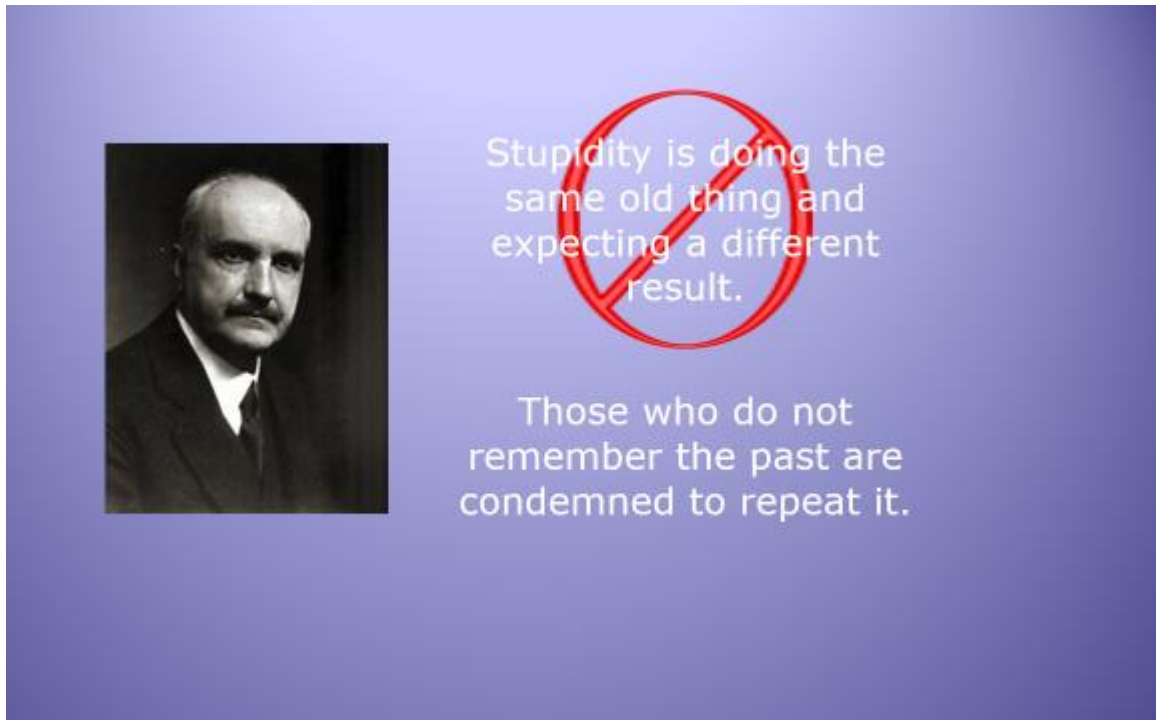
Bear in mind that these were all recorded by people who have been on project management training courses and in some cases are "qualified project managers"

To paraphrase what they have said:

"We should have used simple, well known and long established principles of project management to run our project"

I peer reviewed a couple of the post-project reviews from the highly successful 2012 London Olympics. I know it's slightly simplistic and doesn't do justice to the great work done on that project by the various teams but those reviews didn't really say a great deal more than "we did the basics, we did them well and it worked".

Let's see what our second philosopher has to say about this in combination with the 40 year gap between identical lists of why projects fail.



As George Santayana said “Stupidity is doing....”

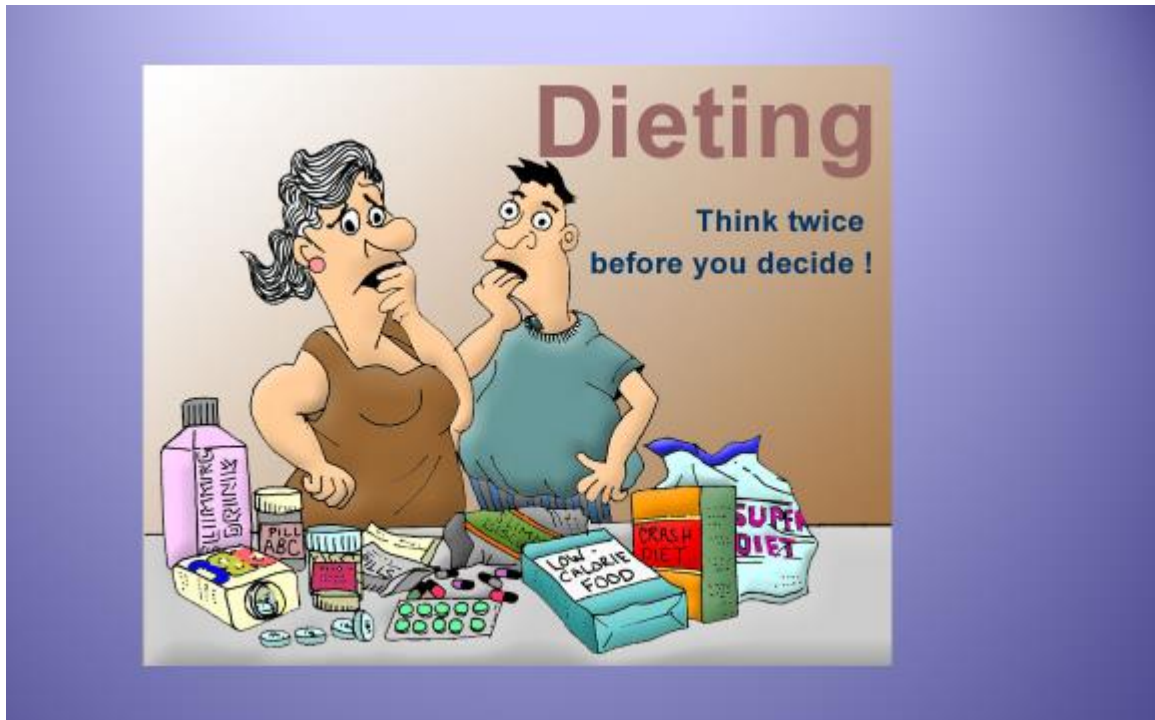
Actually, he didn’t say that at all. He was a man of letters and put it in a much more eloquent and educated way.

What he really said was:

“Those who do not....”

Well, if people are actually recording these lessons learned and still making the same old mistakes then there must be something else at play here.

It’s time for an analogy. And the obvious one for us to use is.....



Yes dieting.

Nothing else quite captures the ability of the human race to ignore common sense and do the same old thing time and time again, always expecting a different result.



A quick trawl of the internet will reveal numerous diet plans. All promising quick and long lasting results.



In the USA, people who want to lose weight spend \$45b a year on these plans.

That's a lot of money. Imagine how much food that could buy for people around the world who need to gain weight.

It's philosopher time again – has anyone heard of the Billie Connolly diet?



It is simply this, not pick your nose but “eat less, move more”. It would save people an awful lot of money.

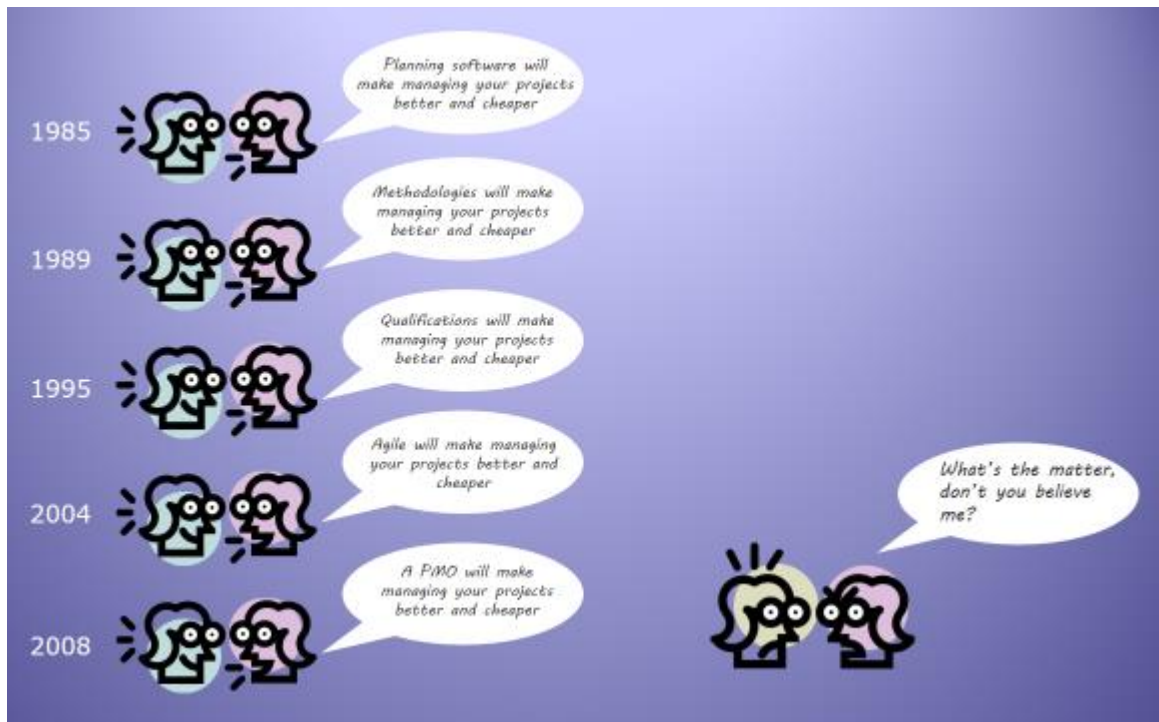
Now, of course. This is obvious. But the fact is it doesn't happen – why?



The answer is that while the idea of “eat less and move more” may be simple, it’s not easy. It isn’t a quick fix and requires long term life style change.

That’s hard when millions of years of evolution has made us crave fatty, sugary foods because for most of humanity’s time on the planet, food has not been in the plentiful supply that it is now. So you get your calories when you can.

Not to mention the son who comes back from rugby training and say “do you fancy a pizza Dad?” It’s socially as well as genetically hard to decline the food you don’t really need. Time to get back to project management, what’s is the pm equivalent of fad diets?



The recent history of Project Management is littered with silver bullets that were meant to achieve a world “where all projects succeed” quickly, cheaply and easily.

In the eighties it was all about project management software

Towards the end of the decade it was all about methodologies

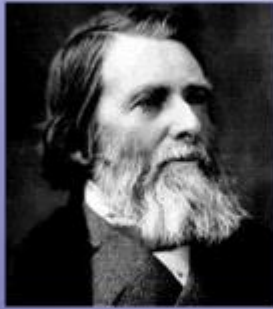
In the mid-nineties – along came ubiquitous qualifications

More recently it's agile, PMO and others

I'm not saying that these ideas have no value – they do. Just not as isolated 'silver bullets'. They all need to be used in harmony.

What we need is the dieting equivalent of lifestyle change but this time it's not just about individuals, it's the much wider community.

Time now for some serious philosophy...



The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot - it can't be done.

John Ruskin 1819 - 1900

But as John Ruskin said 150 years ago.....

Now I'm not talking about Billie Connolly's client here who wants it all by tomorrow and doesn't want to pay for much it.

I'm talking about the investment in the project management environment. It's about getting all of those silver bullets together within a culture that truly encourages a realistic approach to projects, programmes and portfolios and the people who manage them.



"You never change things by fighting the existing reality.

To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

Richard Buckminster Fuller 1895-1983

In a superficial way Buckminster Fuller's philosophy seemed to be the antithesis of that last comment from John Ruskin. His mantra was "more for less". But his approach was to invest in design, invest in people's perception of design and then make the design more efficient. So actually, John and Bucky's views are totally compatible.

So it's pointless constantly carping on about the reasons why projects fail. We need to think about how they can all succeed – and not by focusing on the latest new fad. It's all about creating a new social model that provides a much greater opportunity for projects to succeed.



Q: Who are the people that implement change?

A: Project Managers, allegedly.

Q: What do we have to do?

A: Practice what we preach.

And finally a few thoughts from me.

We probably need someone to organise that change of social attitudes towards projects and their management – who could we ask? Well apparently, project managers are good at planning and implementing change.

We just need to practice what we preach.

Thank you very much for your time and I hope you enjoy the rest of your virtual day.