

Success, perhaps, but not as we know it.....

***This thought
piece was written
by Dr Bill Egginton
as one in a series
sponsored by
[www.programme
-recruitment.com](http://www.programme-recruitment.com)***

We all want success and project sponsors as a rule generally expect it as part of doing things right. Indeed, the APM vision through to 2020 is 'a world in which all projects succeed'. And quite right to, I hear you say. For far too long, have project managers been battered and the project management profession blighted with headline statistics that claim project success rates of less than 30% (KPMG, 2009) or 20% (Standish, 2008) or as low as 2.5% (PwC, 2004).

In my last thought piece, we looked at P3M and I shared with you the thought that as programme management and portfolio management build in popularity and importance, the traditional, independent, autonomous role of the project manager will become subject to stresses and strains that in many instances, go against the grain of conventional thinking on the nature of the project manager role. As a result, success criteria (defined by APM as 'the qualitative or quantitative measures by which the success of a project is judged') become an issue: not only do we have to consider different perspectives (sponsor, project manager, supplier, end user etc.) which has always been the case, and timeliness (the point in time at which we choose to measure success (usually declared in a good project business case and again, part of standard, good practice) we now need to think about levels of success.

Let's take some examples. The Sydney Opera House: success or failure? Heathrow Terminal 5: same question. What about the Airbus A380?

Of course, it all depends.

Yes, the iconic building on the banks of Sydney harbour was 16 times over budget in 1973 after 6 years of construction, but can you imagine that city now without those fantastic concrete sails gaping at Harbour Bridge? Again, T5 opened on time, within its £4.5Bn budget and to specification - a master class in major project management - but seek the views of the owners of 20,000 or so bags lost on Day 1 of opening and they may choose to disagree. Many would argue that the problems arose as a result of too great a focus on the 'project' and not enough on the 'programme' and especially the transition of the capability to the business.

As for the A380, well the jury is still very much out. Two years late for its first commercial flight, and now more than £2.5Bn over budget, it remains a problem project - but fast forward 5 years and who can say? At a personal level, as project manager for a power plant project, I was on the receiving end of a 'successful sale' (defined in terms of volume of sales) that had attached to it a contract which was practically impossible to deliver and for which 'failure' (defined as loss of margin) was inevitable. One man's success really was another man's failure – and we worked for the same organisation!

Shenhar and Dvir (2007) have in my opinion, articulated some of the best thoughts on the subject of project success in their work on success dimensions and measures. They describe 5 levels of success: (1) project efficiency, (2) impact on the customer, (3) impact on the team, (4) business / direct success and (5) preparing for the future. Any project can be successful to varying degrees at each of these levels. So, for example, a project that is successful at Level 1 (meeting schedules, meeting budget) may not be at all successful at Level 2 (meeting requirement and specification). Conversely, a project that is successful at Level 2 may have been an outright disaster at Level 1. I also think that this model allows us to take on board considerations that are more relevant to programme and portfolio management. For example Level 4 includes measures such as sales, market share, service quality and brand, all of which lend themselves to programme level 'outcome' measures as opposed to project level outputs. Building on that, Level 5 – preparing for the future – encourages organisations to think longer term around developing new technologies, entering new markets, building new core competencies and new organisational capacities – entirely consistent with the principles of portfolio definition in respect of aligning investment to strategic intent.

So, success is not a simple, one-dimensional concept. It has multiple dimensions and several layers, and in the world of programmes and portfolios the effect of this multi-faceted construct is compounded in a way which requires careful use of language, clear definition of roles and responsibilities, general agreement on the criteria to be used and a coherent blend of strategic, change and operational management. Only when we think about success in this holistic way and use the full spectrum of success criteria to inform discussions and justify decisions will the organisation as a whole prosper. Not only that, but there's also a very good chance that in so doing, organisations will avoid damaging their project people – which happens, by the way, to be the final, Level 3 (impact on the team) dimension.