

Waking the dead?

Christopher Worsley of CITI sees great value in examining the bodies of dead corporate projects in order to create a healthier future.



As the nation that nurtured Sherlock Holmes, and one fascinated by TV programmes like 'Silent Witness' and 'Waking the Dead', the idea that logic and science can solve problems is very appealing. But in most of these programmes the victim is already dead; the search is for the guilty.

So, is a forensic service for programmes and projects an exercise in turning over the remnants of the body and blaming the guilty, or can it be a much more positive exercise?

Christopher Worsley, ceo of CITI, has seen dead, dying and extremely successful projects in every sphere of their consultancy and education

work. And he sees real value in holding a post mortem, not to enhance a blame culture, but to ensure mistakes are not repeated and to allow organisations to 'grieve' and move on, ensuring that self-destructive habits are changed.

There is always a temptation to compare failure with success to find out the difference, but, in the case of dead projects, Christopher says it would be like comparing a dead body with a living one: 'What would it tell you? You already know it's dead and the comparisons will only tell you how dead it is,' he says.

'What you need is to compare the dead body with other dead bodies to determine the factors that led to the problem, and what triggered the final failure. That's how and why post mortems add value.'

The story began some years ago when Christopher was asked to look at some failed projects to discover what the real reasons for failure had been. They used standard analysis techniques, but the results only revealed the symptoms not the diagnosis. To continue the medical analogy, the heart might have failed, but what had triggered it?

So they used a three-layer model set within the governance envelope of the project – things like sponsorship, direction, policies, plus issues outside the project environment.

Identifying common issues

The idea of the model was to find common issues in failed projects, particularly around monitoring and control. This work led to descriptions of nine key controls that had to be in place and they borrowed analogies from systems analysis to produce simple control techniques, which would automatically trip an action if certain parameters were not met.

Christopher said: 'For instance, in a contract, as soon as costs vary in one particular way then a set mechanism will trip in. It is, of course, simple in theory, but not necessarily in practice.'

'We found that less than 30% of seriously failed projects could be blamed on inappropriate execution by the project manager. Of the rest, there were about 20% that were destined to fail from the beginning because of societal or extraordinary environmental factors that would never have allowed the projects to work.

'The rest of them failed through governance factors: wrong choices were made. The most

CAUTION DO NOT ENTER

widely known example of this was the London Ambulance System where governance was wholly to blame for the failure. Another example is the Scottish Parliament building. 'Our conclusion was that it didn't fail its objective – to provide an historic building – even if that wasn't overtly stated in public, nor was cost really an issue. We believe it was almost deliberate that controls were not put in place so that at no time did cost appear in the list of constraints. The decisions that were made were all about quality and a little bit about time, but quality was always first.

He says that for a project to run well it has to have a set of constraints. If you take one of them away, the project fails because the dynamics of the project get out of kilter. 'Our view is that for a project to be successful and for its disciplines to work properly, there must be a clear set of constraints. With failing projects, the constraints are often contradictory.

'The role of the project manager is to manage within the constraints, whereas the governance

pounds; money wasted in ways that even a juvenile should have spotted.

Another example comes from the financial services sector where an insurance company had a project that would never have succeeded because one of the basic premises was that the field operatives would need the equivalent of a PhD in mathematics to be able to carry out their work.

Not a witch hunt

Their forensic work investigates who or what is to blame, but avoids the problems associated with a witch hunt. In fact, when investigating a project failure, CITI use the non-attributable reporting system used in the aircraft world to report near misses. This ensures that people are willing to own up to problems, knowing that they will not be penalised.

Strangely, Christopher says that one of the most valuable aspects of carrying out a forensic study of a failed project, is that it gives an organisation and opportunity to grieve. He says, when an organisation has a very major failure it goes into shock and becomes very tentative about developing new projects. Another reaction is to invest in so many layers of controls that a bureaucracy is created that isn't conducive to effective project management.

Yet another reaction, when faced with a major failed project, is for an organisation to go into freeze mode, and continually reassess why the project failed. Chris says that this is akin to the reaction experienced by people following a major loss. They cannot let go, and cannot move on. So, he says that a very powerful aspect of their forensic work is to enable an organisation to move forward, knowing why the problems occurred and being able to recognise them should they start to happen again.

So, instead of putting inappropriate control processes in place to try to stop previous problems recurring, the result of a forensic examination is that the organisation gets the freedom to grow while recognising that some environments are, to use a pathological analogy, toxic.

Christopher is quick to differentiate the post mortem from a health check. The latter measure variances from a healthy state, while a forensic examination assumes the project is moribund or dead.



When organisations offer their projects for examination they often do so in the hope that resurrection is possible. Most, if not all, are beyond revival, and Christopher says there are only two possibilities: look at the bones to find the causes of failure to avoid a similar fate in future, or find nuggets that might be retrievable and still have value.

He gives as examples a couple of NHS projects where the kernel idea and much of the products were fine but the implementation was a disaster. In this case it was still possible to recover some of the elements and put them in a different 'wrapper'.

Given that people still find it difficult to conduct post-project reviews of successful projects, it may be even harder to offer up the failures for dissection. But Christopher is clear that those who have gone down this route have found it invaluable, though he admits that getting client testimonials to this effect isn't easy for obvious reasons.

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FORENSIC:
'relating to or denoting the application of scientific methods to the investigation of crime'
Oxford English Dictionary

structure is designed to manage the constraints. The conditions under which you are likely to find failure are where the project manager fails to manage within the constraint set and doesn't have controls appropriate to identify when the danger zones are being approached.

'Problems in governance often come from a lack of understanding of what the constraints should be, a failure to manage them properly, or a failure to maintain them in the face of quite complex pressures.'

Failed projects are less obvious in the private sector because, as Christopher says, 'they bury them deeply', whereas in the public sector, project problems are open to public scrutiny.

Nevertheless, they have witnessed projects in the agrochemical sector, for instance, that have been unmitigated disasters costing millions of