

## WHAT IS SUCCESS?

PM consultant Barry Tuckwood (pictured) says companies can improve their chances of success if they focus on the end product of every project.



There are hundreds of articles and papers that discuss project success – yet there is no real consensus on what it is.

What do we mean by project success? People often refer to the time-cost-quality aspects alone, with some consideration given to the project's outputs. But while time, cost and quality are easily measured, the real appreciation among stakeholders, by which success might more reasonably be judged, is more difficult to assess.

Nor is it sufficient to measure success through return on investment, especially when there are diverse users involved which makes the measurement of benefits complex.

The context has to be simple: project success should be clear to everyone involved and the expectations match what can realistically be achieved.

In my view, then, project success combines the products and the management of the project. Success can only be fully achieved if both aspects are successful, and is therefore critically dependent on two factors:

- The initial project brief.
- The end product's sustainability.

Project success therefore captures the entire cycle – from idea generation, through project selection and project implementation, to the sustainable use of the products. And in fact, success can only be assessed after the project's deliverables – the products – have been in use for some time, possibly years. If you pay insufficient attention to either the brief or to sustainability, the project is unlikely to be judged as a success.

We should also be interested in who is responsible for success. Often this is thought to be the project manager – but the real responsibility is with the project sponsor.

This is the person who acts as the owner of the project, providing the vital link between the organisation and the project manager, to ensure that project management can be effective, the resources (including finance) are available, and the project deliverables match requirements.

### Success factors

Companies should be clear on what their success criteria are and what factors contribute to it. According to Lim and Mohamed in the *Criteria of Project Success*, the 'criteria' are a set of principles or standards by which you make a judgment, so if the project achieves these objectives it will be a success.

Meanwhile, the 'factors' are items that will contribute to success, so that if these factors are present you are more likely to achieve your project objectives.

Research by Wan Maimun, Wan Abdullah and Ahmad Ramly suggests there are 10 top criteria for success:

1. Team and leadership.
2. Project manager.
3. Communication.
4. Stakeholder management.
5. Planning.
6. Scheduling.
7. Organisation.

8. Control and monitoring.
9. Financial resources.
10. Quality management.

Ranked lower are these elements:

- Policy and strategy.
- Learning organisation.
- Contracting.
- External environment.
- Risk management.
- Performance management.
- Innovation.
- Contractor.

Compare these criteria with the components of the PRINCE2 methodology:

- Organisation.
- Planning.
- Controls.
- Stages.
- Management of risk.
- Quality.
- Configuration.
- Project change control.

It may seem strange that the success criteria from 'policy and strategy' onwards are deemed as less important, but in fact they could be included in other items, according to those who participated. So in fact, the PRINCE2 components embody all the project management requirements identified by the research as being important for success.

## **Route to success**

To improve the chances of success, companies should adopt the following elements and adapt them to suit their organisation-specific conditions. Being inter-related, they need to be considered as a whole:

### **1. Fit with strategy.**

As a first step, it is vital to ensure you have a known and understood corporate strategy. This does not mean simply broadcasting it as a mission statement, which everyone will think of as propaganda; it needs to be both believable and believed.

The strategy has to be conveyed through individuals who are respected by everyone for their integrity and honesty, which means that if the sceptics can be persuaded, the message is more convincing for everyone.

### **2. Agreed brief.**

Preparing a brief helps define the purpose of the project, but it is only the starting point. It needs to be developed into a more substantive statement of what the project includes and excludes.

While it may be possible for a single person to create the brief, it is often best to involve the wider circle of people affected. With that input, you are able to complete the brief so that everyone can work towards it.

### **3. Stakeholder engagement and communication.**

As indicated above, the stakeholders need to be involved. They are all the people who could contribute to or derail the

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project – and they need to be engaged as completely as possible, ideally at the beginning, when you are developing the brief.

This will help you clarify the positive and negative connotations of the changes that will result from the project, from the perspectives of all those capable of supporting or derailing the project. Workshops and similar exercises can reveal the many different and conflicting views on what needs to be done, how, and what the risks are.

As the project progresses, the stakeholders need to be kept informed about what is happening, what they need to do, and how they can be involved. Communicate with them regularly and in an appropriate way.

#### **4. Project organisation.**

There is increasing recognition that companies need to have an organisation that is specifically designed for the project; this differs from the corporate organisation. Accordingly, the project organisation may change over the duration of the project but its early establishment aids communication and clarifies personal roles, responsibilities and accountabilities.

Within this organisation it is vital to include those people who will have responsibility for sustaining the success of the project (see below).

#### **5. Clear sustainability responsibilities.**

Projects always need to have a way of using and sustaining their output. This might appear to be straightforward under normal organisational arrangements – where responsibility becomes part of maintenance by the relevant operating unit – but there are many occasions where this can be blurred.

For example, if the project involves setting up new processes which are cross-functional, or need to be used by outsourced providers or partners, you will need to clarify ownership.

Again, who will update software or applications that have been created by third parties? Who will ensure continuing compatibility of shared data services? Who will take ownership of new standards used within the organisation, user and supplier communities?

#### **6. Clear project accountabilities and delegated responsibilities.**

There is a distinction between total accountability for project success and responsibility for project management. But this is often blurred in practice, with the project manager being assumed to be accountable for aspects beyond their remit.

Typically, the project manager and wider team are dispersed once they've completed their role on the project. How, then, can they be held accountable for achieving the benefits?

Accountability rests with the project sponsor, whose role begins with confirming the business case, obtaining funds and other resources, and providing corporate direction to the project manager, leading to project handover and product sustainability.

Delegation enables everyone to understand the part they are playing in the project and how other people contribute to it. The more decisions can be delegated, the faster they can be made.

#### **7. Methodology and planning.**

Planning is an essential part of the approach, and any appropriate company methodology can be used. PRINCE2, agile, ITIL and others all have their merits, but whichever methodology is chosen, it has to be suitable and acceptable to the users. Imposing an approach on an unwilling audience will not work.

It makes sense to ensure the approach is consistent for all projects, although rigid adherence is likely to inhibit rather than encourage progress. As with any approach or new technique, the benefits have to be shown, understood and believed, and training provided.

## 8. Change management requirements.

All projects, including the introduction of new IT systems, result in changes such as improved processes, expanded services, new products and changed facilities. Changes affect staff, customers, support services and suppliers, and perhaps the general public.

So include testing and piloting arrangements. Changes take time, longer than usually expected, but this can be speeded up if the changes are recognised as being acceptable, beneficial and necessary.

## 9. Project change process.

Changes will occur to the project during its evolution and development – it is unrealistic to expect to pre-define every aspect of a project taking into account all internal and external influences on its direction, goal and progress. So you need a process that ensures beneficial changes are included where appropriate.

## 10. Risk management.

Risk is part of all projects; if you embark on something new, there are inevitable difficulties to be faced. These must be recognised and, before proceeding, they must be acceptable.

For major change, one part of mitigation is to pilot the project. Selecting the right group to trial will help to smooth the way.

## Conclusion

We need more research on the process that leads to project success, and I would like your views. Please let me know how you might adapt this summary of an approach for improving the opportunities and chances of project success:

- Be selective – choose the best projects.
- Define, maintain and review the goal.
- Engage stakeholders, communicate continuously.
- Organise for the project.
- Ensure sustainability.
- Provide clear roles and responsibilities.
- Use a consistent methodology and planning approach.
- Plan for organisational change.
- Expect project changes.
- Recognise the risks, constraints and conditions.

Overall, the requirements for project success are individual and will change during and after the project, and will possibly differ afterwards from those originally expected. However projects need to have a clear goal with a well-considered understanding of what success means for the many stakeholders involved.

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