

## Project management: a vital skill

**In times of prosperity projects provide an opportunity to increase the range of services for your customers and in times of economic hardship running a successful project can significantly improve an organisation's bottom line. Nicky McCrudden explains why well-managed projects can go a long way to increase the reputation of both the project manager and the organisation.**

All projects, even relatively small ones, involve a significant commitment of money and time, both directly and indirectly, and they can achieve fantastic outcomes. We might think of the building of the pyramids and the construction of the Great Wall of China as some of the earliest examples of successful project management but too many of today's projects are not delivered on time, on budget or to meet their objectives. In other words, they fail.

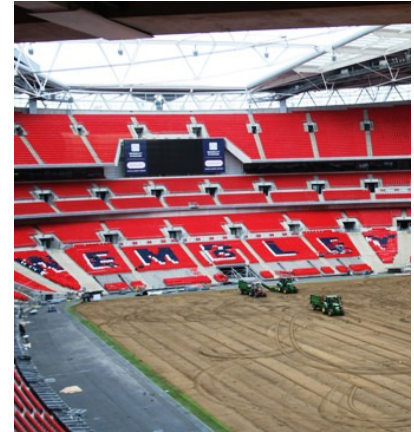
According to a 2002 KPMG study which surveyed 134 public companies, a massive 56% of respondents had written off at least one information technology (IT) project in the previous year and more recently the NHS National Programme for IT failed. It is not just IT projects that founder and no sector or organisation is immune to project management disasters. Few projects go as badly wrong as the re-development of Wembley Stadium in 2000. It started badly with a two-year delay because of financial and political problems. Then there were serious contractual problems that ended in a court battle, the wrong type of concrete was used in the foundations and the 'iconic' arch design had to be changed because it was unsafe. All in all, the completion of the stadium was more than a year late and some £300 million over budget.

You may reassure yourself that your projects won't go 'the Wembley way' by managing them in Microsoft Project or controlling everything in an all-singing, all-dancing spreadsheet but project management is more than computerised documents. Ask any of the amateur project managers who appear on television with Kevin McLeod or Sarah Beeny on house building or rebuilding programmes.

High profile and galling it may be but the cost of mismanagement is not just financial. Consider the lost opportunities held within a failed project. The company contracted to project manage the construction of the new Wembley envisaged it being completed at least twelve months earlier. What projects did they have to forego because of the extension of the Wembley project? Opportunity costs have been categorised as two-fold: the direct financial cost of the failed project, and associated lost business, and the loss of other projects that could not be taken up because of the staffing capacity held within the failing project. It could be argued that there is a third opportunity cost within a failed project, that of reputation. In today's harsh financial climate reputation is more important than ever in securing future business. How many sport, leisure and culture managers can afford to have their professional reputation blemished by an unsuccessful and possibly costly project?

Many researchers have tried to identify exactly why projects fail and the list of reasons they have produced runs to volumes but they broadly fall into four categories: people, planning, control and execution. Projects involve people, affect people and people with a stake in the them have the power to influence their outcome, sometimes negatively. Projects often fail because managers have not secured local management buy-in, not built the commitment of the project teams or failed to engage stakeholders at the right level. Failing to plan, as the old saw has it, is planning to fail. Projects without a specific identifiable need and achievable targets have been set up to fail. How will you know if you succeed if you don't agree what success will look like when you start? Inadequate planning from the outset, lack of a proper rationale and unrealistic scheduling and budgeting are ingredients of a recipe for disaster. Project managers need to be master plate-spinners. Projects are all too frequently tagged onto people's day jobs with no acknowledgement of the time commitment needed. To quote the Scots rhymester Robert Burns, "The best laid schemes of mice and men aft gang aglay". He may have been thinking of the project manager's art. Accidental project management (management without good knowledge and skills) can lead to fatal errors in project delivery, such as missing crucial indicators of risk or succumbing to the deadly 'project creep'.

Arguably, what underlies all of these risk factors are the skills, knowledge and preparedness of the project manager. Bev Spence, a charity events organiser, certainly thinks so. "If you rely on an untrained project manager, or someone who manages by 'gut feel' you increase the likelihood that they'll miss a crucial step or those all important indicators that things aren't as they should be." Project management skills can be trained and the investment required can be saved exponentially. There are almost as many methods of learning project management [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)



Wembley Stadium: a case study in project management

**"The novice or inexperienced project manager needs to be taken through the lifecycle of a project with all the background knowledge and skills needed to undertake comprehensive project planning, engage and manage stakeholders, co-ordinate a project team and control project risks"**



Nicky McCrudden: managing projects

skills as there are projects, from formal qualifications such as the Office of Government Commerce-owned PRINCE II (Project in Controlled Environments) to picking up a DIY guide from the local bookshop. The novice or inexperienced project manager needs to be taken through the lifecycle of a project with all the background knowledge and skills needed to undertake comprehensive project planning, engage and manage stakeholders, co-ordinate a project team and control project risks. Whether the project is as simple as setting up a five-a-side league or as complicated as touring Turandot round 25 town halls, sitting next to Nellie or sucking it and seeing are no substitute for proper training.

**Nicky McCrudden is a project manager and trainer.**

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