



► HOW TO KEEP IT PROJECTS ON TRACK

By Darren Pass, Baringa Partners

The IT world is no stranger to high-profile project failure. But as economic conditions tighten we can expect projects to come under even greater scrutiny as companies pursue every avenue to ensure returns.

So how do you keep technology projects on the track to success? A successful project needs smart design. This is particularly true of IT-based projects, where the results are often invisible to the naked eye. But if you don't know what the result is meant to be you cannot tell whether it has been a success.

All IT projects need a clearly articulated vision, a sound business case and an overall aim, to ensure that it does

not lurch from goal to goal in a constant search for justification. The vision should describe the organisation you are going to be - not the company you are now. Otherwise you're investing simply to remain fossilised in the business processes of your past.

This is one of the key skills - and therefore attraction - of a business consultant and systems integrator. But the choice you make has a serious impact on the project outcome. The draw of the big-brand firms is obvious - the trusted name and track record appear reassuringly risk free.



But what you should really buy is your partner's people – not their PR skills. Quality flows from the top, so you need to know the executive level at least. But you should also check out the people on the front line who will be sharing your cube-space for possibly the next few years. You also need to make sure the partner's incentives are aligned to the specific goals and success indicators of the project as a whole.

Achieving all this requires strong leadership on the client side. Successful projects should be driven by 'pull' from clients, rather than 'push' from consultants. Client-side leaders also act as 'vision champions' with the next tier of management – consisting of both consultants and in-house staff – turning that vision into reality.

Strong leadership also ensures that people remain aligned to the project until its conclusion. In a lengthy project, it is all too easy to lose sight of the end goal when surrounded by day-to-day detail. If staff understand the contribution of their own role there are likely to be fewer unprofitable distractions and diversions.

Projects also benefit from maintaining a balance between continuity of staff and new blood. Maintaining stamina and enthusiasm over a four year period can be tough. New starters can inject that much-needed impetus, while experienced staffers keep the project firmly on track.

For the same reason it is useful to have mid-project goals and measurement points. The scale and complexity of major IT projects can be overwhelming. Breaking them down into manageable easily identifiable deliverables is the only way to stay on course. It should feel more like a relay race rather than a cross-country slog.

But that requires both sides to have a degree of flexibility, starting with procurement processes. Once applied to real-life situations, rigid contract management can produce unexpected, negative outcomes as partners scramble to deliver on no-longer realistic plans. Any number of high-profile projects have been doomed to failure the moment the procurement terms were set – and then ruthlessly enforced.

Finally, that flexibility has to be extended to the technology itself. Your new systems must support specific business goals. But excessive configuration leads to cost and complexity. It also raises questions about the business case. Having selected a software solution and established why it will best serve your organisation, significant changes to the product means you have almost certainly diverted away from your objectives. Organisations that bend a little to the technological capabilities being introduced will enjoy a far higher success rate.

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