

Communication, Communication, Communication

Tim Nicholson, Operations Director, PDMS

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IT project failures - we have all seen the headlines regarding the wasted millions and months spent on projects which are ultimately abandoned. But it's not all doom and gloom when it comes to IT projects - I believe there is a way to ensure that every project is a winner and it's not rocket science.

That isn't to say that delivering winning IT projects is easy, it is a complex task that requires strong leadership and a great deal of commitment from all involved. But the most essential ingredient for a recipe for success is undoubtedly good communication.

OK, it isn't quite as simple as it sounds. There are many reasons why IT projects do run into trouble such, as inadequate business analysis and poor technical Foundations TM , but from my experience poor communication makes for poor projects - projects which deliver inadequate, inappropriate results or at worst are deemed as failures.

When I talk about communication, I don't just mean between all members of the project team but all of the project stakeholders. In fact, it's important to discuss projects up front with everybody who has a stake in the outcome. That list may include not only users but also customers, business partners, senior management and internal departments on whose cooperation a project's success often depends.

To ensure success, IT projects must also have a clear overriding business purpose. A business purpose isn't the same thing as a set of business requirements; it is the reason for producing them in the first instance. This purpose must be communicated to everyone involved in the project so that everyone shares the same project vision. Things can go very wrong very quickly if everyone involved in the project isn't playing the same ball game.

This is because with projects involving IT, just as in any form of engineering, the finished product requires the application of a number of different skills. Without effective communication, it is far too easy for the individuals involved in the project to lose sight of the bigger picture, in this case the business objectives, and to compromise these by letting technical detail adversely affect the overall direction of the project.

Vital to the success of IT projects is good project leadership, usually in the form of a project manager. The role of the project manager isn't just to produce Gantt charts and deliver on time and to budget. A project delivered on time and in budget is not a success if it does not meet the original business objectives. Yes, the role of the project manager is to focus on specific, defined and deliverable objectives, but it's mostly about talking to people - communicating effectively with everyone involved.

In an industry full of jargon and acronyms and complex technologies, the need for clear communication is more important than ever and it is the role of project managers to facilitate communication. They are an important interface between the client and the suppliers, ensuring that the business objectives are understood by the technical specialists and, just as importantly, ensuring the technology and its benefits are understood by the business specialists.

Each project is different and accordingly the critical communication lines for each project will be different. Good project managers recognise this and identify and develop the channels of communication. They also recognise that communication bottlenecks between individuals or organisations involved in an IT project are inevitable and develop pragmatic strategies to deal with them. They are prepared to discuss and explain and communicate openly and honestly.

You may be familiar with a popular approach to problem solving known as KISS which, I believe, stands for Keep it Simple Stupid. Although this is valid in many aspects of business, with complex projects such as those involving IT it doesn't always work. Labelling any participant in the process as stupid is simply an excuse for failing to communicate and explain sufficiently the complexities of the problem. My experience in the IT industry has taught me that success is more readily achieved by talking to clients rather than KISSing them!

As obvious as it may seem, communication really is the key and despite the thousands of management books written on the subject, it is an area often overlooked by the IT industry. IT projects will only succeed if everyone involved in the project is talking to one another, with the same common agenda, and in the same language.