

Innovations Improving IT Project Performance

After a decade of miserable performance statistics, information technology projects are beginning to deliver better performance.

"This is intriguing," says PMP researcher Dr. Blaize Horner Reich, of Simon Fraser University, Canada. "Research shows that IT projects have become increasingly complex, both organizationally and technologically."

Reich, together with Dr. Chris Sauer of Oxford University, U.K., recently surveyed 57 project managers from four countries to find out what they are doing that might explain this increased performance. On average these project managers each had 15 years of experience working internally and as consultants for a variety of organizations in Canada, the U.S., Britain and New Zealand.

The researchers discovered that project managers who are improving performance are addressing three deficiencies commonly found in traditional project management:

- 1) An inattention to customer importance
- 2) A narrow definition of what project management entails
- 3) A single-minded focus on a fixed set of tools and techniques

Project managers of high-performance IT projects are doing whatever it takes to assist the client, says Reich, even if that means accepting changes in the project specification and scope. "They're also extending their responsibilities beyond previously established boundaries to become more involved in formulating the project, justifying its activities and delivering benefits past the implementation period," she says. "Plus, they're using a wider variety of innovative approaches."

Overall, say the researchers, project managers are gaining improved project performance by building an innovative and adaptive team that knows how to focus on business objects and deliver business value under stress.

The result? "A team that can adapt when needed, innovate when needed and break the rules when required," says Sauer. "Only teams that can act collectively to learn and create new solutions can be successful on difficult projects."

Sauer and Reich's research revealed innovation in three project management categories: goal definition, project set-up and project execution.

Goal Definition

High-performance project managers use two innovative practices in this part of the project management lifecycle:

- 1) They challenge the customer. Interview respondents all agreed that they no longer accept project goals as presented. They believe their responsibility is wider in scope. That's why, says Sauer, "the project managers we talked with no longer assume the customer is right. Instead they try to understand what the customer needs and then try to match their goals to an appropriate set of deliverables."
- 2) They deliver value early. These project managers also focus on what the customer really wants to achieve, rather than what they want the system to do. With this goal in mind, project managers can try to deliver value early, which gives the project some early momentum. "This is highly motivating," says Reich. "The client is supportive, the team is proud and the business has some early payback."

Project Set-up

A project that is set up correctly, is set up for success, say the researchers. Project set-up is where innovative techniques count the most. The researchers found five common creative practices among the survey respondents.

- 1) They create a resilient team by hiring team players and doubling up the team. They don't just hire experts, but look instead for members that will complement each other. "I do not want prima donnas who are ready to get out of here as soon as they've done their thing," said one project manager. "I want people who will sustain the project."
- 2) They prepare for the unknown. They coach team members in improvisation and dealing with the unexpected, and create networks of knowledgeable experts to call on.
- 3) They train the sponsor to be a productive project partner. They develop a relationship with the sponsor to understand their abilities, and then educate them.
- 4) They focus the team on business value. They ensure members understand the bigger picture.
- 5) They plan for post-delivery. They say planning for post-launch support early highlights the key operational issues that the installation is likely to face.

Project Execution

While most project-management guidebooks advise sticking to the project plan, survey respondents recognized the need to be flexible and adaptive. Their innovations in this area fall into four categories:

1. They adaptively re-plan. They create the project plan together with their team so that everyone knows the deliverables. The plan becomes a guide, not a master. This allows the project manager to look for new ways to deliver the project and gives the team more power over their tasks and timelines.
2. They use meetings to focus attention. They hold more meetings during difficult patches, create an environment where problems are immediately addressed, and establish a no-blame culture.
3. They encourage dissent. They create a climate where the team can think reflectively, challenge decisions and break the rules when needed
4. They empower and delegate. By hiring professionals whom they trust, they can delegate authority and resist engaging with the details.

While all of these techniques are counter-intuitive to traditional project management approaches and also challenge accepted wisdom, they are making a difference, say the researchers.

"We believe that these creative insights will prove useful to practice," says Sauer, "and may even impact future research and guidelines for the IT project-management community."

SOURCE: Reich, B.H., Sauer, C. and S.Y. Wee. "Innovative Practices for IT Projects", Information Systems Management, 25:3, June 2008, pp. 266 - 272.

PMPerspectives.org is a website which connects project managers and sponsors with project management researchers. Our mission is to understand and improve project management practices. The research team comprises Dr. Blaize Horner Reich and Dr. Andrew Gemino from Simon Fraser University, Canada and Dr. Chris Sauer from Oxford University, UK.

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