

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT?

Is it possible for me to comment from an external point of view on what seems to make a project successful? I have only had a week to learn about project management, to analyse what is happening in a small selection of projects and with limited contact with experienced team members from OTC. But why not?

What is success?

To start with, how do you quantify success? If I were to set myself a target of making a sandwich in one minute but it took two, would that be deemed as a failure? If I set the target as being a day but still took two minutes would that be deemed as a success? Maybe, maybe not, but this is an example of how unrealistic targets can affect a project. But everyone knows roughly how long it's going to take to make a sandwich, depending on what type of sandwich you are making of course. With a project you may never have carried out this type of work before and in all likelihood will not do it again. So how can targets be set when you don't know how long it will take or how much it will cost?

How can success be achieved?

Firstly, in order to work out which direction you are going in, there is one key element which needs to be finalised and approved so that every team member is fully aware of what they are doing – a plan. A plan enables everyone to be clear on the process of the project and they can check the plan to ensure that they are monitoring progress against the intended direction. Managing a good plan will also allow the customer to see how the project is developing and it will take into account any hindrances along the way.

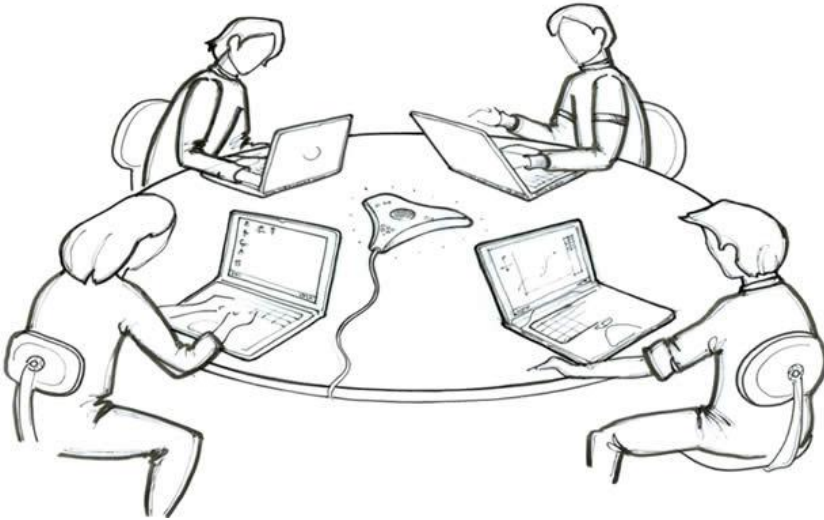
Nevertheless, having a plan B may not also be such a bad idea. It is always possible that despite the plan being well thought out, it might not work. After all, what's wrong with Plan Z?

In the plan, there will also be responsibilities that members of the team will have to take on. A project that prospers will take into account who works best where and allocate



suitable jobs to the people who can carry them out with the best chance of success and, importantly, with an upbeat attitude. Ensuring that members of the team or any contractors get paid when they expect to be paid will maximise team satisfaction and they may be willing to work flexible or longer hours with the confidence that they will receive their reward.

My research, as well as that carried out by other sources, suggests that having a project manager who is in complete control and has outright authority boosts the project's likelihood of success. This does not mean that he or she has to act like a dictator and knock down any ideas that come from team members, as they may actually further the project, but equally wasting time listening to a group of people squabbling over which way to go will not be positive for the project either.



Communication between team members is vital if a project is to work, even down to the basic issues of understanding the terminology in use. For example, two similar words that are used regularly can have very different interpretations and alter the outlook of an individual working on the project. For example is a budget “money I can spend” or is it “a target I shouldn’t exceed”?

As well as the often complex terminology in use, the project manager also has to communicate with members of the team to inform them and, if needed, to assist them. Effective communication increases motivation and capable people who are well led and are clear on the project’s aims, when combined with suitable resources, should be able to deliver what is required and make the outcome a success.

Who decides on success?

Following a plan that delivers what the customer wants will also increase the measure of success as they decide if the project has delivered a good final product. They will also want the project to be finished when they asked for it to be finished, even if the target is just thought up (as suggested earlier), so sticking to time constraints is another fundamental issue – after all, going overtime will almost certainly see the project go over budget and as the cliché says, ‘time is money’.

As well as the customer, maintaining a strong relationship with other stakeholders also increases the likelihood of a successful project – as they are the ones that determine whether the project is a success or a failure in their opinion! A project might have been completed in time and on budget but they may still deem it to be a failure. However, contrary to this, if the project is failing but the stakeholders’ expectations are managed then it may not necessarily be perceived as a failure. Each stakeholder is different though and analysing their motivations will also be a benefit to the project – for example, deciding which project benefits are important to them and knowing how they will react to the positives or the negatives of the ongoing project is all part of project management. Keeping an honest and open relationship with the stakeholder will enhance the project’s success chances but being selective in presenting data to show favourable outputs might not go a miss at times.



Do new ideas get in the way of success?

Despite the most meticulous planning, there is always the chance that something has been left out or that new ideas will emerge and alter the structure or direction of a project. Integrating new ideas into the project without also introducing a delay is paramount to its smooth continuation. Being able to apply any increase or decrease in work, or even making a technical change, whilst staying within the budget and delivering to time also assists the project's success rate.

Sometimes ideas and changes are for the good of the organisation and not just specific to the project. Treating these new ideas as a mini-project will mean that it is completely separated from the existing work and this will hopefully minimise its impact.

If there are new ideas that are accepted, it may not always be suitable to apply them immediately. Waiting for an appropriate time may well enhance the mini-project's chances of success and analysing the direction you want to take it in and planning meticulously, like you would for the main project, would reduce the risks that are taken on, as well as working out where into the project the new idea will come.

What also helps is asking quite a simple question – is it necessary? If the new idea has come from stakeholders and they are adamant on it being applied then it is quite obvious that it will have to be integrated into the project. Conversely, if it will bear little assistance to the ongoing project then forget about it because it's not worth wasting time and money working on it or even talking about it. However, some new ideas could enhance the project in the long term rather than just the short term so ideas should not be brushed aside too quickly – just maintain a balance that will limit possible disruption. Integrating multiple ideas into one may also help in analysing their chances of success as implementing too many ideas may well be a step backwards rather than forwards.

A SUMMARY OF SUCCESS

- Construct a meticulous plan where team members have been designated with a role that is best suited to their abilities.
- Have a clear project manager who has good communication skills and can interact with his team without difficulty
- Develop a strong relationship with stakeholders and customers to assist the smoothness of the project
- Integrate new ideas into projects with ease and without disruption to the existing project – but only if they are necessary!

