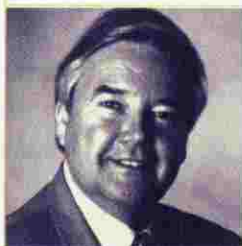




Hidden in Plain Sight



By
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Project management is a hot topic today because of the need for greater competitiveness. Successful information systems projects have the potential to improve productivity, enrich customer and supplier relationships and strengthen marketing and sales—all of which add dollars to the bottom line. Over-budget, late, underperforming or cancelled projects take dollars away from the bottom line.

The number of successful projects continues to rise each year. The successes are still outnumbered, however, by underperformers and cancelled projects. Why do so many information systems projects not pan out as expected? As most project managers will tell you, the implementation process for multifaceted systems is everything but a one-two-three exercise.

Is there some hidden factor in terms of the difficulty of IT project implementation? CompTIA polled project management subject-matter experts on this topic. We asked them whether information systems projects were different from engineering projects and if so, why.

Seventy-two percent of the subject-matter experts in our informal poll said that there were important differences. Reasons given included:

- ◆ The rapid change and short life cycle of technology.
- ◆ Lack of standards between various lines of technology.
- ◆ The relative newness of information systems, leading to unrealistic expectations.

- ◆ The uniqueness of each project and the problems associated with “one-offs.”
- ◆ High susceptibility to changes in direction.
- ◆ Lack of reliable success measurements compared to construction or other projects, which offer more tangible deliverables.
- ◆ Legal issues surrounding privacy and records retention.

Seventeen percent of the subject-matter experts said there was no difference in approach between types of projects, while 10 percent said they did not know. No one can say for certain whether the majority or minority view is correct. There does seem to be truth contained in each perspective. Successful IT project management seems to require a marriage of traditional methods with new insights and techniques—insights and techniques that take into account the rapid change of technology and the impact of integrated communications and information systems on diverse groups and business processes.

Taking this view, successful projects will rely on project management and technology fundamentals, as well as techniques that incorporate the basics of business and how people—customers, suppliers and staff—cope with information systems.

This is a pretty tall order. It requires technical, business and interpersonal expertise at a time when simply staying on top of technology is a full-time job.

It now appears that IT professionals, both inside and outside project management, are increasingly being asked to master this broader set of skills and knowledge. Employers are not only concerned about whether their information systems projects will succeed,

but they are also looking for help in making existing systems more effective, more productive and more user-friendly. Employers need IT professionals who can solve a wider set of problems—with solutions that make technology work for people and not vice versa.

The next stage in the evolution of careers in the computing industry is not solely dependent on technology, but also on the ability of IT people to become leaders in making business processes more effective and productive and in developing systems that are easier and more straightforward to use. They must also become more interactive problem-solvers.

This is not something we can solve with spreadsheets, Gantt charts or risk analyses—the traditional tools. IT professionals will only begin to solve the employment and career issues facing them by breaking down the barriers in their own minds and the minds of teachers, trainers and technology suppliers to the need for adaptation to a decidedly new environment. Much as the project manager must layer new insights onto traditional tools to be successful in IT project management, we must combine the wisdom of the past with the realities of today.

Having a well-rounded education in its widest sense is needed. Earning a progression of vendor-neutral and vendor-specific certifications is essential. Gaining experience in working with and helping diverse groups of people is mandatory. These are the new realities of IT careers. Perhaps they've been hidden in plain sight for far too long. ◆

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