

Selling into Project Success

By R. Max Wideman

Introduction

Why is it that we hear so much about project failure in the Information/Technology (IT) world? Is it justified? For example, Jim Highsmith observes (elsewhere):¹

"The Standish Group's Chaos reports (1994 and 2001) have caused a tremendous waste of IT dollars. Just look at tool site after tool site – project management, collaboration, software development, modeling tools – the numbers from the Chaos report are given as a key reason for buying particular products. [Yet] these reports are heralded as verification that the software development community is in a sorry state of affairs and that we must all be unprofessional, undisciplined, and immature."²

Jim goes on to observe:

"If software [development] is in such a sorry state, why are three of the richest people in the world software people: i.e. Bill Gates, Larry Ellison, and Paul Allen? [And] why is software the driving force behind nearly every technology, from the Web to bioengineering? [Yet] according to the Chaos reports: in 1994 82% of all projects were "challenged" or "failures." In 2001 we got a lot better – only 72% were "not" successful! How can we reconcile the overwhelming intrusion of software into every nook and cranny of our corporate, governmental, and personal lives with a 72% "not successful" rate?"^{3, 4}

Quite so, but people will clasp on to anything if they think it will help them sell something. We need to look at the terms of reference.

What constitutes "Success"?

As Brian K. Willard points out:

"Project success tends to be measured by the big three: Cost, Time, and Requirements being met because these are easy and timely to measure. With standard project management techniques, you can identify at any given point in the project management process whether you currently have a successful project, or a challenged one. That is: 'This focuses upon the project process and, in particular, the successful accomplishment of cost, time and quality objectives. It also considers the manner in which the project management process was conducted.'⁵ However, this does not deal with the issues facing the project manager under many current business conditions. 'Clearly, the old adage of on time, on budget, and (even) conformance to requirements are not, of themselves, satisfactory success criteria.'^{6, 7}

And Baccaini opines:

"It is common for project management literature to confusingly intertwine the two separate components of project success [and product success]."⁸

Consequently:

"No system of project metrics is complete without both sets of measures (performance

and success) . . ."9

In other words, to assess the success of a project you need to not only look at the project management process, but also the success of the product. Clearly, if the product is not a "success" then the project was not a success.

Product success

Measuring product success raises some major issues. On what basis can we agree that the product was a success:

- Was it bought?
- Was it used?
- Did users like it, i.e. did they evince a measure of "satisfaction"?
- Did it make money?
- Was the product an enabler of the intended benefits?
- And did it produce those benefits in sufficient measure?

And, we might add, if it did, who cares if the product was late and over budget?

Of course, there is always room for improvement – otherwise we'd never make any progress. But in the IT world, the very idea of upgrades has become a part of the business plan. We can reckon that almost any software will either be reworked as an upgrade version, or supplanted by a newer and better application. Indeed, if that does not happen on a one to two year cycle, we may even be disappointed. This attitude has become so all pervasive, that we even get disappointed when more solid artifacts fail to be significantly upgraded, and that applies across the spectrum from cell phones, to household equipment, to sports gear, to cars.

Eventually, it comes down to whether the driver for change is a real need to improve over the previous model, or is it a device to be able to sell the latest "new and improved" must-have? Theoretically, the "market" will, or should, decide but that is not always the case. Certainly, if the product fails in a big way on any of the questions we raised above, the product and hence the project will have been a failure.

But the opposite does not necessarily hold true. For instance, the answers to the above questions may all be very positive simply because of a very slick and powerful marketing campaign. A campaign designed to convince people that this product is just what they want to fill a need – even if they have not recognized that need before!

Clearly there is a lesson here for the project management fraternity. It is not sufficient these days to be "on time, on budget", nor even that the product works just the way it should and satisfies all the "requirements". At the time of the transfer of the project's product into "the care, custody and control" of the users, the product needs to be *marketed*. It needs to be ***sold into the market place***, i.e. into its environment.

Then, and only then, upon completion of a successful marketing campaign, will the product be a success and, ergo, the project also become a success. Of course, that costs money, and management must be prepared for it because that is not strictly a part of the "project budget".

Hazards

True there are hazards for the project manager of an IT project along the way.

- What if the business or commercial environment changes?
- What if the technology platform changes?
- What if related software from other sources changes, necessitating a change in configuration?
- What if the Business Case conditions change?
- Or there is excessive "scope creep" to the point the product projection is no longer viable?
- What if there are safety concerns?
- Or "political" opposition, i.e. resistance to change that has nothing to do with the product itself?

It seems to us that all of these are beyond the realms of the project manager's control. What the project manager can do is to have his or her risk management sensors out, and if the conditions are sufficiently severe, then cancel the project. Wouldn't that be the smart business thing to do? And in so acting, shouldn't that be considered a project management success and not a project failure?

There is another compelling reason. In these days of a highly competitive global market, time-to-market is crucial. You can have a better product, but if it is behind a competitor, the chances are that it will have missed the "window of opportunity". Consequently, the product won't "sell" and the project will indeed be a failure.

The best way of finishing a project early is to start early. This may well mean starting not just with incomplete information – project information is never complete – but with substantial uncertainty. So, in many cases, starting early but on the understanding that experience learned along the way may cause us to cancel at some point is simply good project risk management. People who take risks may win only, say, 10% of the time, but people who don't take risks don't win any percent of the time. In fact, they probably don't even survive!

The problem is that senior management, and project managers for that matter, get hooked on an idea and become reluctant to give it up. Worse yet, they look at the effort and money invested thus far and say to themselves: "Only just a little bit more and we should be home free." That could be true, but it is the wrong premise for a decision. In making such a decision, never count what has already been spent. What has been spent to date is already "sunk cost". Always look to the future and estimate what has still to be spent and whether the benefits justify continuing.

And if it does appear to be worth continuing, what is the updated Business Case now telling us, and what are now our most important goals? The chances are that the answer to that question is to be found somewhere in the product quality dimension. And that, in turn, depends on having the competence and skills available to bring the product to a successful conclusion.

The lesson

What is the lesson in all of this? It is that project managers, and their supporting management must be "marketing savvy" and apply that to the rollout of the product upon completion of the project. That means public relations, advocating, training, advertising, and, yes, even "selling".

As a postscript to these thoughts, we recently received an anonymous letter quoting from an author writing under a pseudonym by the name of Eugene Farmer.¹⁰ The dissertation in this letter describes how to kill a software tool in ten easy steps, in other words, how not to launch such a product. We have carefully paraphrased the content and applied it to "**How not to roll out the product of a project!**" Here they are for your edification.

1. Keep the new product isolated

People find new things threatening, especially if they have not chosen them themselves. So keep the new product separate, preferable in splendid isolation and away from any attempt to value its worth relative to products currently in use. This way it will eventually be discarded on the grounds that it has no value.

2. Never try out the new product on a project

This might easily demonstrate the new product's usefulness. Besides, anything new involves an extra learning curve and that is to the detriment of the project's budget and schedule. This will allow people to scorn the new product without knowing anything about it.

3. Use the new product only occasionally

Regular use of a product leads to familiarity, even makes it become essential. That's bad because it could obviate the need for equally occasional training. It's bad because it could make the training people redundant. Moreover, the less the product is used, the more repetitive is the learning curve and the consequent perception that the product is hard to use.

4. Make the use of the product optional

Be conciliatory. Introduce the product to potential users with the invitation: "Try it to see if you like it?" This encourages anyone with the temerity to try the product to offer helpful suggestions recounting all the things that they think should be fixed or improved. In other words, everything that they don't like based on all the things that they have been used to. That is, anything that is the slightest bit different is unacceptable. Also, be very careful not to judge their performance on the basis of the new product. That will put them under extreme stress and people don't like stress.

5. Take advantage of existing problems in the use of existing products

Carefully point out that the new product will fix all the problems that are caused by existing products. Be equally careful not to point out any of the new problems caused by the new product. This way, the new problems will come as a surprise and a shock, causing the users to reject the new product out-of-hand. Further, if you've also made it clear that the new product and its trial runs have been conducted at great expense to the management, people will realize the money they are saving the company by not using it – and feel well satisfied that they are doing the right thing.

6. Benefit from fear, uncertainty and inertia

Understand that people naturally resist change, so you can hint that the new product will save a lot of time. In people's minds, this is "code" for dispensing with someone's services. This results in consolidating a team spirit amongst the existing group – and they "close ranks". This solidarity is entirely beneficial to the organization.

7. Step lightly

In large organizations, in particular, "small steps for little people" is venerated. Such an approach is appreciated because it avoids threatening middle and upper management. The best way to do this is to keep the budget, expenditure and consequent effort, low. This also has the effect of throttling any attempts at experimenting with the new product to determine its merits and potential. It is also a good way of avoiding any embarrassment in the event of a snafu.

8. Park the new product on someone else's band wagon

A continuous quality improvement initiative is ideal. Make the new product a part of it. Everyone

believes in quality and knows instinctively that when it comes to deadlines, it's the first thing to go – and the new product will go with it.

9. Be thrifty with training

To be authorized to attend a training session is a prize indeed. It provides the opportunity to relax a little, chat with friends and temporarily turn one's back on the usual daily drudgery. The coffee, donuts and muffins are an added bonus. So, make training sessions highly competitive. Try to get the vendor or team technologist to speak for free. This will save money and ensure that only the minimum explanation and coaching is exchanged at the session. This approach also encourages discussion to fill time, and such discussion will mostly revolve around what is wrong with the organization and its bosses.

10. Ostracize the product champion

If the product has a champion, this is an ideal situation. Such a person stands out and is easy to spot. People who stand out look like an oddball and are easy to poke fun at. Words like: intellectual, misguided, misfit, come to mind. Only a little surreptitious prodding usually does the trick and the target gets fed up and quits and, more than likely, takes the product with them to apply it within the competition. This results in a double benefit: Saves money on supporting the new product and saves money on salaries.

At that, you are home free – and ready to move on to even more erudite things.

¹ Highsmith, Jim, Selling into Project Success http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/selling_success/intro.htm

² Highsmith, Jim, Practice Director, Cutter Consortium Agile Project Management Practice, Agile Project Management Advisor, <http://www.cutter.com/project.html>, September, 2006

³ Ibid

⁴ See also <http://maxwideman.com/guests/metrics/success.htm>

⁵ Baccarini, David, *The logical framework method for defining project success*, Project Management Journal, 30 (4), Project Management Institute, PA, 1999, pp. 25

⁶ Wideman, R.M., Improving PM: Linking Success Criteria to Project Type, Available On-Line at: <http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/improvingpm/improvingpm.pdf> p1

⁷ <http://maxwideman.com/guests/metrics/view.htm>

⁸ Baccarini, 1999

⁹ Cooke-Davies, Terry, *The "real" success factors on projects*, International journal of project management, 20 (3), April 2002, p188 (pp. 185-190)

¹⁰ Apparently quoted from IEEE Software magazine, November/December, 2006, pp 12-13. If you happen to be Eugene Farmer, then we offer our sincere apologies.