

## PMF Book Review



**Book Title:** Avoiding Project Disasters  
"Titanic Lessons for IT Executives"

**Author:** Mark Kozak-Holland

**Publisher:** Multi-Media Publications, Inc.

**List Price:** \$ 44.95 USD (eBook: \$ 29.95 USD)

**Copyright:** 2006

**Reviewer:** René Le Bel

**Review Date:** October 2006

---

### Introduction to the Book:

Avoiding Project Disasters parallels today's hubris of IT practices against the hubris surrounding the building, marketing and operation of the cruise liner named Titanic. The book is targeted at senior level management needing a resource to understand key IT project issues. The author Mark Kozak-Holland, a history buff and IT consultant in emerging technologies has written a user-friendly book with chapter objectives, conclusions and extensive appendices.

### Summary of Review:

The author presents the market conditions for transatlantic travel, social environment at the beginning of the twentieth century and the tremendous impact the sinking of the Titanic had on people's regard for the invincibility of technology. Today this tragedy is still a powerful metaphor for our civilization, as the author points out the sinking marked the end of an era. Many people today view the sinking as simply a case of bad luck or even bad technology. At the time of the tragedy, blame was laid on the brittle metal used for the hull. However the author makes a very strong case arguing the ship was flawed early in the planning stage by decisions to place the grandeur of the first class passengers' experience above basic safety design. The author points out how the luxurious design compromised safety at several points in the planning stage.

Today's IT industry has not had this kind of "Titanic-like" disaster. However there have been many serious accidents caused by faulty planning, programming and execution. In this book the examples of IT disaster fall more into the hiccup category as opposed to "Titanesque". The author documents the numerous mistakes made in planning and operating the vessel, all leading to make the collision with the iceberg and decisions made after the collision as truly catastrophic on the fateful night. On the IT side the author presents many valid arguments for

looking ahead and what to watch out for in planning and testing IT projects. Risk prioritization is an integral part of IT, as something will inevitably go wrong. Those who believe technology is infallible, however frequently ignore this "given".

### **Overview of Book's Structure:**

The book is well organized. The preface and introduction are solid with detailed overviews of IT pitfalls and common mistakes and wrong assumptions. For example: "How is my IT project linked to corporate strategy?" This linkage is often missing and is a primary reason for IT project failures. Throughout the nine chapters the author covers the project cycle from "initial big idea" to maiden voyage. The major topics are developing and mapping IT strategies, constructing your goods, planning and testing your plan, delivering goods, dealing with the unexpected when it happens and conducting the post-mortem. The appendices support the book with additional information and one IT case study. The author develops and builds on good IT practices throughout. The Titanic story is told from the original "big idea" to post-mortem after the tragedy. Lessons learned from the Titanic are paralleled to good practices in IT project management.

### **Highlights: What I liked:**

Retelling the Titanic story is a very clever tool to demonstrate how not to design, complete and operate an IT project. The author captures the rampant hubris of the day concerning the invincibility of technology and the then common held belief – "Man has conquered nature." Other more tragic ship disasters happen after the Titanic but the high level of marketing and unchecked competitive spirit surrounding the maiden voyage only increased the impact on the outside world.

**Tragedy:** In addition the author looks at how the regulators and governments were behind the times in regulating the number and capacity of lifeboats and certifying whether the rules and safety procedures of the cruise line operator were followed and properly implemented. The date of the maiden voyage was moved up for purely financial reasons even though the crew had had very little time to test and operate the vessel before the transatlantic voyage. Very little training was done after the launching of the vessel and before the maiden voyage due to the artificial time constraints imposed by management.

In addition, when the Titanic hits the ice shelf proper procedures were not followed. The captain's authority was overruled by management and a bad situation (beaching the vessel on the ice shelf) was made worse by later reversing the ship off the ice shelf without any forethought to the possible consequences. The author even looks at the politics surrounding the inquest where false conclusions are reached to protect powerful interests. The entire tragedy is an example of truly reckless behavior unchecked at any level of management or by government regulators.

### **Shortfalls: What was missing!**

One of the themes running throughout the book about the Titanic is the risks and dangers of being first at any cost. The author could pick up on this theme for the IT side and more closely examine the folly of being first in IT at any cost.

### **Who might benefit from the Book:**

The publisher has targeted the book at senior level IT management. However readers with little IT experience gain insights into why IT projects get into trouble. It is an interesting and enjoyable read.

Ordering information about this book can be found at [www.mmpubs.com](http://www.mmpubs.com).

---

### **Short bio of reviewer:**



***René Le Bel***



*René Le Bel has over twenty years experience in educational publishing. He is the publisher for a secondary science schoolbook company in Texas. His undergraduate degree is from Univerisité de Montréal and he is currently enrolled in the Masters of Project Management at the University of Texas in Dallas. He lives in Dallas with his family and can be contacted at [rene@lebel.com](mailto:rene@lebel.com).*