

PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINT – MARCH 2009

“If only we could do that again...”

Project Practice Grounds: Improving Project Performance
in the 21st Century

By Guy Giffin

Pilots, surgeons, soldiers, stage actors and cricketers have all long understood the importance of practising their activities in order to improve their performance and reduce the risk of failure in the real world. Flight simulators, cadavers, wargames, empty theatres and batting nets are all essential tools for applying the most basic principle of performance improvement: the need to test, practise, and perform ‘dry-runs’. In contrast, project managers have to use their real projects, real organisations and real customers as their main practice grounds. Accordingly, the learning process, especially during complex and uncertain projects, can be very expensive and a common sentiment amongst project managers is: “if only we could do that again...”

With the success of organisations being ever more closely linked to their project management capability, there is now an abundance of project management literature and training courses on the topic. Many of the courses conclude with multiple-choice knowledge tests, leading to a “qualification”. Project management, however, is a highly practical discipline; it is what project managers do, as opposed to what they know, that counts. This is illustrated by the fact that project learning reviews consistently produce the same list of reasons for problems and failure: unclear objectives, poor communication, head-in-the-sand risk management, etc. We know that we need to engage stakeholders effectively; the challenge lies in actually doing it!

This phenomenon has been dubbed the “Knowing-Doing Gap¹”: in the world of business research and academia there is too much emphasis on gathering the wisdom, and not enough emphasis on how to transfer expertise and ensure that practitioners actually apply the knowledge: i.e. change behaviour.

“The only source of knowledge is experience” Albert Einstein

Another difficulty with developing project management capability is that, whilst there are certain techniques (e.g. network planning and scheduling) that are scientific, project teams also require a range of more ‘artful’ skills. Project management is increasingly about overcoming human, as opposed to technical, challenges. Clarifying objectives, judging the trade-offs in contract and risk strategies and balancing conflicting stakeholder interests, for example, are all likely to involve decisions and judgments where there are not necessarily any

'right' answers, or simple recipes for success. Project management is also an increasingly dynamic capability; projects unfold in ever changing and complex environments which places even more reliance on these non-procedural, "juggling" skills.

In order to overcome these fundamental and persistent learning challenges, the global project management community, like many other professions, needs effective project practice grounds, with a particular focus on the non-technical aspects of managing projects. Developing these practice grounds requires expertise in several areas: profound understanding of the dynamics of complex projects and what determines project success, and a range of financial, technical and social systems modeling techniques. With such expertise available, there is now an opportunity to take project performance improvement methods into the 21st Century. Project teams will increasingly have the chance to practise and perform dry-runs and thus avoid having to say "if only we could do that again..."

¹ The Knowing-Doing Gap - Jeff Pfeffer and Rob Sutton, HBS Press 1999

About the Author:***Guy Giffin****Author*

Guy Giffin is a Director of Prendo Simulations Ltd. After more than 10 years of researching how to model people, organisations and complex projects, Prendo is pioneering the use of social system modelling and project simulations in order to improve project management capability and performance. Specific applications include a simulation, commissioned by Shell, that models how a typical spectrum of stakeholders behave during a sensitive project. Prendo was also commissioned by Atkins Global to develop a simulation that models the universal planning, monitoring and control challenges during the design phase of a project. Most recently, in collaboration with the Major Projects Association (www.majorprojects.org), Prendo developed a comprehensive simulation that captures the generic, non-technical disciplines that determine the overall success or failure of complex projects. Guy can be contacted at guy.giffin@prendo.com. www.prendo.com.