

HEALTHCARE.GOV - OBAMACARE WEBSITE PROJECT: A RETROSPECTIVE

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Abstract

As media engagement and political fallout ensues pertaining to the recent ‘Obama-care website’ launch failure in the United States tied to new Federal Government healthcare legislation, this paper provides a retrospective analysis as Information Technology professionals and project leaders evaluate the health of their own project deployment activities. Such a retrospective may provide valuable insight as to project kickoff and pre-deployment corrective actions that would preclude such project launch failures project sponsors.

What We Know

In order to complete a successful retrospective, a full assessment of known gaps in project performance is required. In this paper’s use-case (U.S. Federal Government Obama-care website deployment), there are several ‘known’ factors pertaining to the website’s launch and it’s perception of failure in the media. Those known factors publicly available include:

- The project ‘sponsor’ is deemed by most in the U.S. as three-fold:
 - The U.S. Government’s Executive Branch (President)
 - Senate and Congressional elected officials who voted ‘for’ the legislation and funded it by signing it into law
 - The U.S. Democratic political party
- It is widely known that bi-partisan political support for the concept of the legislation (Federally-backed Healthcare provisions) is not robust
- Legislation and funding supported a go-live of the website as of October 2013
- Website failures pertaining to workflow performance, site latency and access problems have been experienced by the user community
- Providers have reported issues with the back-end data driven from the website’s front-end after go live (incorrect data feeds from the website’s front-end)
- Only 1 in 6 visitors to the Federal Government website actually completed an enrollment

- As reported by U.S. news channel CNN, 106,185 people have enrolled in the first month of the website's rollout – in a nation of over 250 million individuals. Media views this as a low number of enrollments. The administration indicates that slow enrollment is expected since the deadline isn't until December 2013. Root issue here is lack of a 'proactive' stance on the enrollment targets which would preclude the 'perception' in the media that the site is under-performing. Thus, the concept of user-adoption should be politically managed as well as analytically benchmarked in order to preclude 'perception' issues on projects.
- Since reporting issues with the site, political maneuvering has ensued through a series of congressional inquiries, political posturing, and assignment of a Chief Technology Officer (CTO) 'fixer' whose job it is to correct the website deficiencies.

Retrospective / Lessons Learned

Most experienced Information Technology (IT) sponsors and project leaders have experienced projects where outcomes were less than favorable. Using this federal healthcare website project as a benchmark, there are few surprises here.

Two key factors therefore come to light which must be addressed in short-order:

1. A focus on corrective action pertaining to the failed website launch is imperative. This would involve development of a 'punch-list' of gaps, prioritization of corrective actions based on impact, resource allocation and appropriate technical actions to resolve the top-tier issues, and
2. A focus on root cause analysis to preclude recurrence would be a natural next step but only after item 1 above is completed.

Strategically, what we see on the Federal Government benchmark project is not unlike the factors experienced on most large enterprise-level IT and Cloud Engagement projects. Let's explore a few parallel scenarios:

Sponsorship

Strong executive-level sponsorship on project engagements is vital. Sponsors play a critical role in setting up project success criteria, providing budget support, establishing partnerships and team alignments to ensure successful project delivery and openly communicating with the stakeholders who will potentially benefit from the resulting output of the project's delivery are all critical for project sponsors. Most executive level sponsors also incur political impediments within their own organizations when driving technology direction or business application direction for their firms. Successful sponsors are able to 'influence' competing executive viewpoints and they gain leverage on the back of successful application and project delivery. In this paper's project benchmark, political components and the value of strong executive sponsorship are both real. The failure of the administration to effectively address the role of 'sponsorship', as with the corporate project executive sponsor model, is a

root cause break-down which will require post project evaluation by the U.S. Federal Government.

Project Success Criteria & Testing Payloads

The federal project is experiencing a serious gap between what is expected in the market vs. what the project is delivering. Project leaders know that ‘success criteria’ must be proactively defined on all successful projects as they serve as a post-deployment measuring tool with which to evaluate project delivery effectiveness. In the Federal Government model for example, the number of users the Healthcare.gov site can handle at one time (25,000) is deemed by some to be significantly less than what is required to ensure enrollment completions by users on/prior to the scheduled target of December 31, 2013. Thus, load and performance testing payloads in a test scenario would have precluded this issue prior to a production launch of the application. This is ‘Project 101’ for most IT professionals.

Therefore, an effective gap in the ‘test strategy’ is highlighted with the Federal Government website project which encompasses the need to support active website user payloads, unit/functional testing, end to end testing events to mitigate downstream data quality issues, and the concept of User Acceptance Testing (UAT) are all project delivery standards which appear to be gaps on the government’s benchmark project. Furthermore, the perception of problems with the website continues. One lessons learned via retrospective alludes to the concept of clarity with regard to ‘ranked’ issues post-production for the website.

Thus, a clear layout of all known issues, a ranked order of importance, and clear communication to the media or stakeholders is paramount in order to gain post production confidence by the users that known gaps are being addressed and will be closed by the project team. Lack of clarity when issues arise with a project go-live only results in continued frustration for the user community and only serves to highlight those whose agenda may not be aligned towards an aim of project success (this is happening in the benchmark project due to political drivers but is not unlike that seen in corporate enterprises. When projects fail, there are often executives who will happily say, “See, I told you so”).

Expectation Setting & Communications

There are often times when IT professionals are involved in project delivery where the end result upon the initial go-live will meet ‘most’ but not all ‘end user’ expectations. The concept of the ‘big bang’ project which meets 100% of user demand is often a pie-in-the-sky approach to effective project delivery – especially when it pertains to rapid innovation and ‘releases’ which are enabled through emerging cloud application technology. When sponsors realize their initial rollout of a project will meet only part of the user expectation or need, it still may make sense for the sponsor to move the project forward (e.g. build the foundation and through a series of post-production releases move towards effectively closing the gaps).

This model is not atypical especially at the enterprise level for IT and cloud engagements. However, the differentiator is the project sponsor’s ability to proactively inform the stakeholders of the plan for the initial rollout and the plan associated with subsequent rollouts that will close the gaps for the user community or stakeholders. Thus, communication

becomes vital and is a key lessons learned (gap) on the Federal Government application rollout.

Procurement and Partnering for Success

An embedded or assumed opportunity for improvement with the benchmark project is in the area of procurement and the alignment of key ‘partners’ who can add value towards project delivery effectiveness. Just as with the enterprise, the concept of ‘value’ when assigning project resources, assessing partnerships or ‘contract awards’ to systems integrators is thus vital to successful project delivery. Most enterprise-level executive sponsors want to have the industry leading integrators and applications involved in their marquis project initiatives.

While the same is most likely true for the Federal Government, an evaluation on the most effective process to use when awarding federal government IT contracts would be a natural post project evaluation aim. In the benchmark project case, it is widely viewed that the finest talent in the industry ‘may not’ have been leveraged in support of the government’s project delivery. Assignment of marquis project ownership to the ‘low bidder’ therefore is not an approach that will always lead to project success. In a country rich with Information Technology leadership (a strong spot in the U.S. economy), a solid project retrospective would indicate that ‘perhaps’ the U.S. Federal Government failed to award the project to the best talent in the industry.

Retrospective – In Summary

Strong executive sponsorship, clear communications, expectation setting in terms of project success criteria, and adherence to key areas of project rigor including project schedule, communication, risk, procurement and financial management are all key factors in the failed U.S. Government website initiative. ANY project that doesn’t adhere to known project delivery best practices and rigor sets itself up for failure. In the case of the U.S. Federal Government’s website project, this unfortunately appears to be the case.

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