

UK Project Management Round Up



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INTRODUCTION

I'm again reporting under somewhat false pretences as I am still out of the country. This means that I will not be covering the project world in UK as broadly as usual, rather, I want to look at two topics in a little more detail and to reflect on the differences in project approaches I see in India, where, to quote Kipling (the author, not the biscuit and cake maker), 'I...spend me time, serving of 'er Majesty the Queen'. Sadly, I am only serving me, rather than Herself!

FLOODS

Anyone who reads a paper will know that the south and west of England, and Wales, have been hit by a number of storms of almost biblical proportion in January and February. Winds of over 100 mph have accompanied heavy rain fall where in some places a year's total has been dumped in a matter of hours. The outcome of these storms is a significant number of homes flooded, major damage to infrastructure, sustained power outages and general misery for thousands of people.

In one widely reported incident, the main south west rail line was washed out in Cornwall. There have been other highly picturesque views of the Somerset Levels looking more like a vast lake as they flooded nearly 2 months ago and remain water bound still. All these and many other similar ones have an impact on the project world: in fact they have a number of impacts but I want to look at just one, risk and contingency management. (photo courtesy of The Express - www.express.co.uk)



The talk in UK right now is all about lack of Government preparedness and the impact of cut backs in local government spending. Critics claim that successive Governments have failed to make contingency plans for major weather incidents and have not made sufficient emergency funding available to assist hard pressed communities. I don't know whether this is a fair assessment or not but as a project manager, I know that I assess the risks and then make my plans accordingly, monitoring events for deviation. I then act according to my carefully prepared risk plan.

Now, any experienced PM will tell you that risk plans are all very well but they often don't work – not because the risk was not foreseen or that the response was not well considered but because the combination of impacts simply overwhelms the planned response. Frequently, the risk budget is cut back as the project owners do not wish to commit possibly large sums to doubtful events; on others, the sheer scale of the risk incident is so large that even where good provision has been made, it is not adequate.

Against these and many other 'reasons' such as optimism bias, have projects failed. And one of the often unspoken issues is who owns the contingency and how is it's use authorized? The recent weather 'events' in UK will no doubt affect many projects, cause other projects to be instigated (such as emergency repairs on damaged rail lines) and yet others to be curtailed. We have to hope that ownership of the contingency is clearly understood, bold decisions taken on good data and sound project management applied.

STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

We all know what stakeholder management is – don't we? You know, identification of those affected by your project, analysing their potential impact on the project then acting to ensure the best impact on your project. That's the theory, in a nutshell, and if you want to look in more detail, there are some excellent books available, one of which was given away in our prize draw.

I suppose it goes without saying (although I will say it) that the larger the project the more stakeholders there are. So imagine your project is to set up a 'new' country. That gives a pretty large number of stakeholders. How do you engage with them all – or would you even want to? This is a problem for those seeking to establish Scotland as an independent state outside the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK to most of us).

I'm not particularly concerned about the politics of this 'project' although as a resident of UK, I have an interest in the outcome and would like my views taken into account. What I am interested in is how a project manager might address the issues of ethics, self-interest, stakeholder identification and ultimately, how to engage with any or all stakeholders. I suspect all this will be lost in the real politik as some

stakeholders will be seen as more equal than others (i.e. only Scots resident in Scotland are allowed to vote on the topic in the forth-coming referendum – what about all the ex-pat Scots, and how would you deal with the many who claim Scottish ancestry but do not even have British citizenship?). The ethics seem strange to many observers as the majority of the British population are affected by any change to the status quo but have no voice.

For those who think anything can be called a project, how would you describe the referendum - the first stage in a large project? How would you manage it?

INDIAN INTERLUDE

As many readers will know, I have been in India for the last couple of months. This has meant that I have been able to take a dispassionate view of the chaos left behind by the floods and have not been troubled by the ethical and other awkward implications of the Scottish Referendum. My absence has allowed me to take a look at some projects outside my usual cultural range.

First of all I was struck by the outcome of a project I reported on several years ago – the development of the Tata Nano. This caught my notice back in 2010 as it is conceptually similar to the Austin 7 in UK back in 1922. Of course the technology is different and the detailed economic cases do not really compare but both were aimed at the aspiring family man who wanted to move up from a motorcycle to transport his family. The Nano had a very glitzy launch in Goa at the start of last month and I have seen several on the streets both in Kerala and Goa.

Second, the Rail Minister announced his budget lines for the forthcoming term. The train is a key mode of transport in India and perhaps is one of the key economic drivers for this country where long distance travel can only be achieved by the ordinary man in the street by utilizing the railway.



The trains here are long (25 carriages on passenger trains and 50 or so on freight lines are not uncommon), fairly slow moving – the 850 km journey from Cochin in Kerala to Margao in Goa takes over 12 hours and surprisingly efficient. The new provisions include 73 new trains including 17 premium fully air-conditioned expresses. Network safety is due for an overhaul as the elimination of unmanned railway crossings, the development locally of train collision avoidance systems and the installation of fire

and smoke detection equipment. (*photo courtesy of ShaluSharma.com*)

While some observers claim the new budget is pandering to populist opinion, there can be little doubt that these measures will significantly improve an already impressive railway system. Critics have however, been quick to point out that similarly ambitious schemes have been announced in the past and many of the planned improvements have simply never go off the drawing board – where have we heard that before?

At a more local level, there are plans to improve tourist attractiveness in Goa with a new Aquatic theme park planned on the Salcette shore and a series of other attractions such as a wedding venue to attract the lucrative major personal project of many young couples! What is quite clear is the expectation that the Central Government is expected to fund many large infrastructure projects, from the construction of new, long distance road schemes through to local safety improvements and bypass developments. It is interesting that India has just the same planning problems as UK with its own range of NIMBYs, self-interest groups and self-seeking politicians!

Like most countries, India has its problems with corruption and reports on cases fill the national and regional press. In recent times, a movement has emerged that is trying to tackle these issues. It is too soon to tell how effective it will become but the signs are encouraging as attitudes seem to be changing. And before anyone feels too smug in UK, let me remind you about the failed helicopter deal with Westland.

‘East is East and West is West; and never the twain shall meet’ as Kipling wrote in his epic poem. While this may be true in some respects, in the project world, I see much similarity. I suggest readers may want to look up the rest of the last verse of this wonderful tale.

Next month – normal service resumes from Salisbury

About the Author



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Miles Shepherd is an executive editorial advisor and international correspondent for PM World in the United Kingdom. He is also managing director for MS Projects Ltd, a consulting company supporting various UK and overseas Government agencies, nuclear industry organisations and other businesses. Miles has over 30 years' experience on a variety of projects in UK, Eastern Europe and Russia. His PM experience includes defence, major IT projects, decommissioning of nuclear reactors, nuclear security, rail and business projects for the UK Government and EU. Past Chair and Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM), Miles is also past president and chair of the International Project Management Association (IPMA). He is currently Director of PMI's Global Accreditation Centre and the Chair of the ISO committee developing new international standards for Project Management and for Program/Portfolio Management. He was involved in setting up APM's team developing guidelines for project management oversight and governance. Miles is based in Salisbury, England and can be contacted at miles.shepherd@msp-ltd.co.uk.

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