

Your Project Failed, Did You Fail to Identify Warning Signs?

By Pilar Plazas, MS, MBA, PMP, CSM

Abstract

All Project Managers have been exposed to the belief that when principles, tools and frameworks are used correctly they inevitably lead to successful projects. Many Project Managers believe they will always succeed where others have failed. Have you fallen into this trap? If so, you are not the only one. Sadly, research shows that projects fail more often than anyone would like to admit.

The overall failure rate for projects is yet to be determined. The low end of the spectrum indicates some 37% of projects within a given year were at risk, recovered or failed (PM Solutions, 2011). Other reports have indicated a failure rate as high as 60%.

The bottom line is that projects fail. In many cases there are warnings that, when addressed in a timely manner, can help save projects. Moreover, one needs to keep in mind that the causes of failure can be almost as numerous and diverse as the projects themselves. In an attempt to help other professionals in the field, I have identified some of the most commonly overlooked factors that cause project failure.

Project Managers have multiple principles, tools and frameworks at their disposal to make their role more effective. All of those resources are important and helpful. However, a large percentage of projects seem to fail or end sooner than planned. When a project fails, its team fails with it. The work they were developing did not have the anticipated impact and they may even experience a temporary low morale. Moreover, there is an economic impact to the business when projects are not successful: project failure is the cost of capital that could have been used for profitable initiatives. There are numerous factors impacting project completion.

Early on the Project Manager must identify risk factors impacting his/her own project and mitigate them appropriately. This article focuses on risk factors intrinsic to the company and team. However, keep in mind that you can also experience external influences such as rapid industry, market or technological changes.

Dismal Communication: The most common reason of project failure is a lack of communication or miscommunication. A Project Manager needs to actively and constantly involve his/her team members. Communication needs to be a two way-street, on which the flow is based on its stakeholders' needs. All team members need to openly participate. Teams that do not take the initiative, inquire, or challenge assignments, may not consider the downstream impact of their code. They only see communication as the way of receiving information instead of the two-way street the productive process requires it to be. Not surprisingly, in these cases the delivered product does not meet customer requirements or requires a

large number of code fixes during testing. Likewise, Project Managers that do not pay close attention to the information received from the team may inaccurately report progress to stakeholders until it is too late to change the course. There is never too much communication, there is only wrong means of communication.

Inadequate identification of Project Stakeholders: At the beginning of the project it is also necessary to identify all stakeholders, their influence, and their needs. As the project progresses, iterations are useful to review stakeholders. Poor Communication was previously mentioned as a barrier to success; however communication alone is not the problem. It is intimately related to proper stakeholder analysis. Keep in mind that not all information is equally important to everyone. Before communication comes into play, proper stakeholder identification is required. It is necessary to identify who needs to know what information, when they need it, and by what means it needs to be delivered. In other words, the first step before disseminating information is to identify all stakeholders and then their particular communication needs. This is not only useful to meet project requirements, but also to remove obstacles when they arise. This also helps to ensure buy-in for the project so it is fully adopted after implementation.

Low Cultural Intelligence: Teams have become more complex and diverse making cultural intelligence paramount. It is not unusual to find teams spread across all continents. There is an opportunity for these teams to benefit from their diversity. At the same time, mismanagement of this type of team is a very high risk for the project. For a team to see success coming to fruition it is necessary to be able to push together rather than pulling individually. Lack of cultural intelligence leads to behavior perceived as disrespectful, which in turn can lead to team members becoming disengaged. One of the symptoms of this is missing deadlines repeatedly or a decrease in the quality of work. A team that feels respected and appreciated for its composition is more likely to commit to the project success than to their individual interests.

Poorly Empowered Team: Although earning trust from management may be a challenge, it is very important for upper management to empower Project Managers and their teams. This is a twofold issue. On one hand, allowing Project Managers to truly run the initiative allows them to demonstrate their capacity, identify areas for improvement, and earn the respect of the team. On the other hand, when upper management micromanages the team, it can hinder communication and autonomy. The Project Manager spends most of his/her time obtaining approval to manage the project while disturbing the team's dynamics.

Failure to Build Relationships: No project is an isolated initiative. It impacts other departments, apps, projects and stakeholders. Building relationships opens additional communication channels, creates trust, and develops camaraderie. This encourages everyone to push together towards the finish line, especially in challenging times. One can think of it as creating an emotional fully funded bank account, in which withdrawals (i.e. favors) can be made.

Lack of Executive Sponsor: It is normal for projects to run into functional, organizational, cultural, and even political challenges. A key stakeholder at the Senior Management level is very important. The Executive Sponsor helps removing obstacles, mediates conflicts when they arise, and assists in key negotiations that are beyond the authority of the Project Manager. Unattended obstacles beyond the scope of the Project Manager can bring the entire project to a premature end.

No Steering Committee: Even in cases in which there are strong teams and Project Managers working on a project, availability of a strong Steering Committee is essential to success. One of the key responsibilities of the Steering Committee is to support change management. Many projects launch and do not meet usage expectations. These cases should also be considered failures because they are capital funds with little or no Return on Investment (ROI).

Lack of Accurate Metrics: Quantification of progress and problems are the driving forces behind metrics. It is easy to fall into one of the two ends of the spectrum. When a project is relatively small, metrics may be almost non-existing. In such cases, the Project Manager may fail to identify issues early enough to correct them. On the other end of the spectrum, mega projects can have over complicated metrics leading to oversight of important parameters or a delay in crucial approvals. Project metrics are essential to measuring activities, progress, resources, deliverables, and so on. Consequently, good metrics are important to identify risks and corrective measures early on.

Inadequate Testing Strategy: It is important that requirements be clear to develop a proper testing strategy. It is recommended to engage the testing team early on so they have an opportunity to clarify requirements as they develop test cases. It is an early cost that can save much more in retesting in the latter portion of the project. Testing activities determine whether or not the project is successful. When this testing is not adequate, the outcomes developed in the project may not deliver the expected business value. The Project Manager needs to consider a strategic approach to ensure adequate yet balanced testing.

In conclusion, project success is not only dependent on the Project Manager and team performance. Project failure needs to be acknowledged because it impacts the team's morale and business capital. It may be unknown exactly what portion of projects fail, but it is clear that the reasons behind project failure are numerous and complex. Some of those reasons are outside the project team, while others are within the enterprise. Early identification of the risks that are deeply related to the project and its stakeholders contribute to project success.

References

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About the Author



Pilar Plazas

Bogotá, Colombia
Atlanta, USA



Pilar Plazas started her career as a Microbiologist after graduating from Los Andes University in her native Bogotá, Colombia. She soon became certified in Molecular Biology through a partnership between Los Andes University and Harvard University. She participated in the research and development of synthetic vaccines before moving to Springfield, MO to obtain her MBA from Drury University. She later attended Trident University where she completed her Master of Science in Clinical Research Administration with Summa Cum Laude honors. She gained experience in non-profit, private, and public sectors.

During the past 10 years, Pilar has been in Atlanta, Georgia, USA working with Fortune 500 companies in roles of increasing responsibility. These roles include; Global Project Manager, Program Lead, Senior Project Manager and IT Project Manager. She has an impeccable record of success in project management and review engagements. She also has demonstrated the ability to recognize business objectives, foresee the solutions, develop approaches, estimate resources, and deliver successful projects. She is considered highly skilled in communicating with multi-cultural project teams, clients, and senior management.

Pilar is actively involved in the community mentoring the next generation of professionals in her field of expertise. She holds PMP and CSM Certifications and can be contacted via www.linkedin.com/in/pilarplazas