

UK Project Management Round Up

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INTRODUCTION

There is really only one topic dominating the news in UK this month – the Coronavirus. With the capacity to wreck the national economy, the Government is mounting an emergency project to protect the country and people's lives.

GOOD NEWS

There is precious little good news this month with doom and gloom the order of the day for the British economy, and most others too, so it is not just a British problem. But if you look you will find, and I noted that a long-term project in Egypt has completed successfully after 14 years. What, you might ask, has this got to do with British project management? Well, the project relates to one of the pyramids – the Step Pyramid of Djoser and a key part was played by a British engineer, *Peter James*, and colleagues from his Newport firm Cintec.

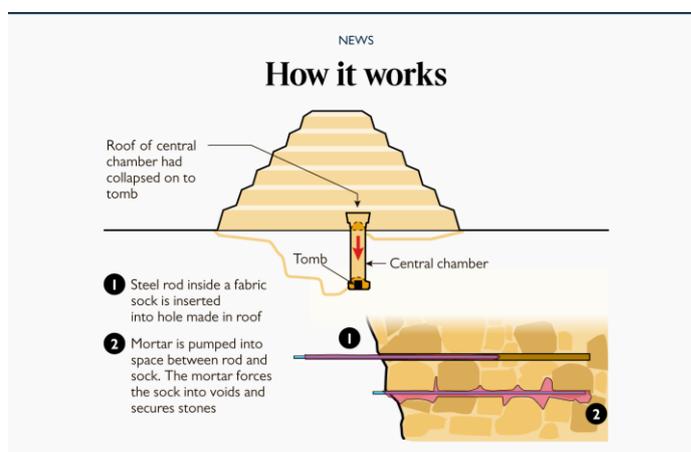


Diagram: The Times

The objective of the project was to prevent the world's oldest remaining building from collapsing. The Step Pyramid, built by Imhotep, is the resting place of the pharaoh Djoser whose burial chamber is almost 100ft underground. The pharaoh's sarcophagus is still in place. But the mummy, and traditional grave goods have not been found, apart from a piece of wood that some previous restoration used as a

ceiling beam. The construction contains more than 11 million cubic feet of stone and is 203ft high.

The project team, as well as Egypt's leading experts, were finally able to celebrate the completion of one of the most complex pieces of reconstruction in modern Egyptian history. The 14-year project has faced many problems including the revolution of 2011 which brought work to a standstill for two years. The task was dangerous as well as technically challenging.



Image: Print Collector / Hulton Archive / Getty Image

The main danger was the interior of the burial chamber where holes had appeared in the roof of the burial chamber. *The Times* reported Mr James as saying “We couldn’t use drills because it might have shifted the stone and collapsed it all around us,” Engineers used a form of airbag to protect the walls and ceilings as they drove in steel anchors.

Archaeologists regard the pyramid as the prototype for all of Egypt's others. It is also the world's oldest surviving intact stone structure. Mr James has another project on the books – the “Bent Pyramid” — the first smooth-sided pyramid, whose unsuccessful original construction gave it the distinctive shape.

BAD NEWS

No, not just the Coronavirus! There is plenty of bad news, but it is pushed into the background and off the front pages but it still lurks, especially around High Speed 2, the troubled major rail programme. The latest issue is whether the programme objectives still include pushing the link to Leeds. A recent speech by the recently appointed HS2 minister, *Andrew Stephenson*, made no mention of Leeds. According to reports in *The Times*, the Manchester leg is going through parliament first, with legislation for the line to Leeds to follow. However, the government has been giving private assurances to the civic leaders in the two cities that the two lines would be built “at the same time” and Leeds would not come out second best. We will see...

CORVID – 19

Impact on UK

And so to the main news of the month – the Coronavirus, which I will address by its World Health Organisation's name Corvid-19. Unless you have been involved in a secret project with no external communication links, you cannot have missed the pandemic. After a slow start, it has moved out of Wuhan and China to strike all around

the world. Almost every country has been blighted by outbreaks with some, like Italy severely affected. I am sure my colleagues reporting from other places will give you an idea of life under the shadow of the virus, but I can only tell you what life is like here locally.

Here in UK, we are blitzed with news of deaths, positive diagnoses and impending chaos. Even the BBC is bigging up the crisis. We are not the worst in terms of positive diagnoses per head of population, or in the number of deaths but we are not the best either, with some 73,000 tested of whom 68,000 tested negative and 5,000 positive and 233 deaths (as at 16.00 GMT Sat 21 March).

My family is taking Prime Minister Johnson's exhortations seriously and minimising social contact. Nationally, this has meant that all sporting events in UK and pretty much the world are cancelled so there are no TV distractions apart from replays of past glories, which gives me a chance to catch up on Biathlon events I missed. We know the situation is serious as the Irish Government closed all the public houses in the country just before St Patrick's Day! In UK, we soon followed this advice and now have no pubs, cafes or restaurants open in which to drown our sorrows. We have also delayed the start of the cricket season which reinforces the seriousness of the situation. Like many in this country, I am maintaining an isolated existence, only venturing out for essential supplies and shunning social contact.

The Downside

The serious side to this is the impact it has on the economy as large parts of it are threatened: footfall is reduced almost to zero, and transactions fall accordingly. Many well-known high street names have closed, some will not survive this closure, but others will, we hope. For now, many, if not most, people are working from home. This poses problems for those not used to such a shift in their working patterns and will no doubt show many that the interminable meetings we are called to are not so vital after all. I have participated in a 5 days workshop for ISO held in London at the beginning of the month. We had a dozen participants in the room and another dozen participating via a conferencing package. While this presented a few problems at first, these were quickly overcome, after all, we were all project managers. It allowed wider participation and generated less greenhouse gas.

Impact on Projects

The impact on projects is difficult to gauge but taking the events business, with all sporting events cancelled until further notice, theatres and other places of entertainment similarly closed, many are left with little work and no prospect of any recovery in the foreseeable future. The Government has stepped in to guarantee wages and provide significant support to businesses but inevitably, the general population is demanding special treatment for their own sector as well as answers to unanswerable questions. A poll of more than 200 project professionals conducted by the Association for Project Management (APM) found that 63% of respondents have already seen an impact on their primary project. The most common being the need to review the project's goals (experienced by 21%) and delays to the project (21%). Other impacts cited were the need to review the quality criteria of the project (14%) and deadlines being missed (13%).

For APM, this has meant the cancellation of all three of their annual conferences and no doubt more face to face events will suffer the same fate. With a strong webinar presence APM will still be able to provide effective support to its members.

Long Term Impacts

The impact on every aspect of our economic and social life is likely to be long lasting and the changes we are experiencing now are likely to have significant implications for business and the economy in the long term as well as the short. One aspect that has been brought to the surface is a general lack of preparedness. In my young days, we had emergency planning departments at county level so there were plans for many eventualities. I have no idea what has happened to those departments, whether they still exist, whether their plans have been abandoned or simply are no longer valid, but it is evident we need something in their place. This was highlighted by the impact of the floods last month and has been reinforced by these events. Such departments would address the issues raised by *Prof Stephen Wearne* in his prescient book on emergency projects¹.

The Up-Side

There are, naturally, some benefits to the situation. First and foremost is the opportunity offered to immunology research groups seeking solutions ranging from better tests for the illness, a vaccination for those infected and ways of preventing further outbreaks. These projects are difficult to plan as there is no end date, just a need to act fast and to eliminate weak candidates quickly. Many in the trade doubt that a vaccination will be generally available till sometime next year, but they are ploughing on as the remedy will be needed for many years to come. Better testing regimes seem a more likely area for success and will allow more effective treatment by keeping the false positives out of the emergency wards. As I write, there is a glimmer of hope from chloroquine, the well-known anti-malaria drug. According to the BBC health correspondent, *James Gallagher*, "Chloroquine seems to block the coronavirus in lab studies. There's some anecdotal evidence from doctors saying it has appeared to help". The BBC website notes that there have been no complete clinical trials which are important to show how the drug behaves in actual patients, although they are under way in China, the US, UK and Spain.

With many people working from home, business as usual will continue to some limited extent but in different forms which may reduce permanently the number of people working in offices, thus reducing commuting. We have already heard reports of significantly reduced pollution after only a few weeks of enforced homeworking.

CLOSING REMARKS

This has been a strange month, but we project managers are used to dealing with unexpected situations. We will have our work cut out for some time to come as we wrestle with the problems thrown up by remote working, changes to project time scales, availability of stakeholders and many other difficulties. However, as *Debbie*

¹ Managing the Urgent and Unexpected: Twelve Project Cases and a Commentary. Wearne, S. H., White-Hunt, Keith

Dore (APM CEO) said on their website: “The unprecedented nature of the Coronavirus outbreak has brought uncertainty for all sectors and professions. Project management is no exception.

“By its nature, effective project management involves assessing and responding to risk. Now more than ever, businesses and communities will be dependent on talented project professionals who can adapt to new circumstances, in order to safeguard the benefits their projects are intended to deliver.” Couldn’t have said it better myself!

About the Author



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Miles Shepherd is an executive editorial advisor and international correspondent for PM World Journal 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, Vice President and Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM), Miles is also past president and chair and a Fellow of the International Project Management Association (IPMA). He was a Director for PMI’s Global Accreditation Centre and is immediate past Chair of the ISO committee developing new international standards for Project Management and for Program/Portfolio Management. Miles is Chair of the British Standards Institute’s Committee on Project, Programme and Portfolio Management and has been involved in the development of UK’s BSI 6079 for more than 25 years. 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.