

## **UK Project Management Round Up**



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### **INTRODUCTION**

Well, here we are at the start of a New Year, the second year of this decade (see the UK report for January 2020 for discussion of the issues around such a stance). Usually, this report is a review of the past year to see how the UK project scene has evolved but as 2020 has been such a strange year, I'll take a different approach. We started the year with a major challenge and were then confronted with a second; both are to a greater or less extent, still hogging the headlines, and both hold some lessons for PMs, political and traditional. So, let's look at BREXIT and Covid-19 and their impact on the project world.

### **BREXIT**

This is the major challenge that started 2020. To be pedantic, BREXIT had actually happened on 1 January 2020 as that was when UK formally left the European Union (EU). Since then, we have been in the Transition Period that terminated on 31 December 2020. HM Government has been negotiating the post transition trade terms with the European Commission (EC) which represented the remaining 27 members of the EU.

There were essentially two options for these negotiations: a complex negotiated trade package that spelled out precise terms for all areas of exchange between UK and EU on the one hand and a standard World Trade Organisation (WTO) package based on general rules applicable to trade where no other agreements are in place. These were presented to the Great British Public (GBP – not to be confused with the currency) as Deal or No Deal. Deal comes in various flavours, such as Canadian or Australian to denote specific variations such as how agricultural produce is treated, or how tariffs are applied. UK politicians, whatever their affiliation, portrayed No Deal as disastrous which limited the negotiations options. EU politicians insisted that every aspect needed to be agreed or no deal was possible.

Against this background, shuttle negotiations were conducted by the UK team led by various Ministers on the UK side and M Barnier for EC. Progress was painfully slow



Operation Stack (Photo: BBC)

with both sides refusing to budge from doctrinaire positions. By the start of December, agreement had been reached on the majority of aspects but there were several major sticking points and it looked like there would be no agreement and thus No Deal would kick in on 1 January 2021. To make matters worse, cross channel travel was suspended resulting in a huge backlog of traffic unable to leave UK in the run up to Christmas. The result

was a major traffic jam, with Operation Stack (the preplanned holding of traffic in the area around Dover) supplemented by an even larger holding of commercial transport at Manston Airport where some 5000 trucks were parked for 4 days over Christmas. The immediate reaction was to think this is what a No Deal BREXIT would look like with major shortages of fruit and vegetables (to say nothing of meat and other goods).



Manston Airport (Photo: William Edwards (AFP))

Fortunately, this blockage was resolved quite quickly and a valuable lesson learned, a point I will come back to shortly. No doubt conspiracy theorists will think this was a manufactured situation to build pressure on the negotiations. Whether this is true is immaterial as some form of agreement was achieved on Christmas Eve. All that was left was the formal signing of the treaty, done on 30 December after UK Parliamentary ratification.

To the external observer, these protracted negotiations looked tortuous, petty and unprofessional; views buoyed by jingoistic press reports on both sides of the Channel. The reality is somewhat different and progress seems to have finally resulted from good selection of negotiators in UK and a change in strategic objectives. Those interested in the nuts and bolts of the end game should refer to leading articles in *The Times* (Bruno Watersfield 24 Dec 20 and Tim Shipman 26 Dec 20) or other reputable newspapers. There are a number of lessons to be learned from these protracted negotiations, beyond some simple political matters.

- Prepare for the negotiation:
  - Know what you want to get out of the negotiations. This is not necessarily what your aim is but should be consistent with it;
  - Define your aim – what do you want to achieve;
  - Be realistic – what is the minimum you can expect to get
- Information Exchange
  - Do you have the information you need to support your position?

- What information is available about the position of other participants?
- Build Trust;
- Bargain
  - Where can you give ground?
  - Are your “red lines” really critical?
  - Try to avoid the all or nothing approach, where can you give ground and under what circumstances;
  - Be prepared to walk away if you cannot achieve a balanced result.
- Conclude:
  - Confirm interests have been met;
  - Decide on how agreement can be recorded;
- Execute:
  - Manage the changes;
  - Maintain contact in order to build the future relationship.

In all this, good leadership is essential – even if your negotiating team is just you! In the case of the BREXIT Trade negotiations, the team was large and maintenance of morale was a problem. The UK Chief Negotiator, Lord Frost, built team morale around a revised negotiating aim and led by example. You can expect many case studies to emerge from this complex negotiation and these will attempt to explain why Lord Frost was able to conclude the deal in less than a year when his predecessors were unable to do so in the previous 4 years. And it was not just the EC habit of wearing opponents down until a deal is reached at the last moment!

## **COVID – 19**

The other major challenge in 2020 was the virus. In UK, we did not really react until mid-March while our European friends were taking various measures, starting anytime after mid-January. Our Illustrious Leader (OIL), the Prime Minister, has been roundly criticized for a slow initial reaction but he could, and has, fairly say that he reacted to the evidence. As Project Managers (PMs), we all know that you cannot run a project without accurate and timely data. This was a pretty rare commodity in the early days of the Covid battle. Progress measurement was shaky, to put it politely, and criteria were ill defined, at least at the start. We had 4 different ways of counting the dead in relation to the virus so it was hard to know how serious the threat was, nor did we have the testing capability to see who had the disease and who did not. **Lesson #1** – gather accurate data to identify the problem.

Of course, the virus did not cooperate with measurement activity, either. Many patients are asymptomatic which adds to the confusion as does the behaviour of the virus in different victims – young, old, pre-existing conditions, obesity, race, all reacted differently so counter actions were difficult to plan. OK, difficult situation but it is no use just sitting there and moaning (you can leave that to the Press – journos like nothing better than criticizing and being wise after the event). The national reaction to the pandemic was slow but the Government had a lot on its plate at the start – BREXIT negotiations for instance, but not all the Government Departments were involved and their degree of involvement varied from nil to 100% so there was some capacity available. **Lesson #2** – identify key players and ensure they have the resources they need to do their job.

I was always taught that on encountering a new situation, one of the key aspects in learning to deal with it was to see how others in a similar situation had reacted and learn from their good and bad practices. Just looking at Europe, we could see a variety of reactions from total lockdown (Spain) to no lockdown at all (Sweden). No specific medical treatments were available initially, just normal respiratory medicines and intensive care. So only a very limited knowledge base was available. Equipment shortages were seen as the major issue initially and rapid acquisition methods were applied, none too efficiently it has to be said.



Most project people would have sat down and made a plan and no doubt that was what Government planners did but this was not obvious to the public, despite the daily Covid Updates on national TV. It is easier to get people to do what you want them to if they know what is expected and how it makes a difference. GBP were asked to do many things, mostly simple, but reasons were not made clear and dire warnings issued concerning non-compliance did not help. **Lesson #3** – formulate a clear plan and make sure everyone knows what it is.

Sadly, the best laid plans don't always work – often because original data is not accurate or more data becomes available later so project people know that plans need to be flexible and change them when the evidence shows a change is needed. After all, Einstein's definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. OIL did remain flexible and changed the tasking regularly but has been accused of making too many changes, and at the last minute. **Lesson #4** – think before you act.

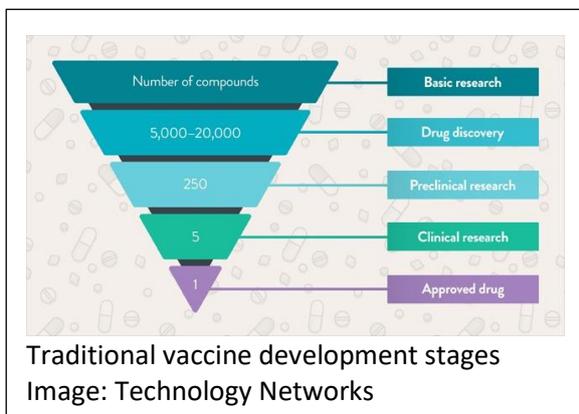
I could go on at length about the Government reaction to the Pandemic as there are many lessons for the Project Person but that would just be tedious. However, you can probably see a theme developing here and that is stakeholder management. Anyone who has watched a Government Covid briefing will get the impression that the UK has reacted poorly, while Scotland has done rather well. I actually think the Government did a pretty reasonable job in the circumstances and looking at the measures put in place across England and Scotland will show that the Scots followed the UK plans closely. The big difference was the way the plans were put to the public. The Scottish First Minister handled her briefings far better than OIL and this is **Lesson #5** – engage your stakeholders. A key aspect here is to check with critical friends how the message is getting across, you can't rely on your chums who will just tell you what they think you want to hear!

## **GOOD NEWS**

The good news, and there is plenty of it about if you look, is two-fold: first, the trade negotiations are mostly over and some sort of a deal has been cobbled together; and second, vaccines are now available to help stem the tide of the pandemic. I'll look at the trade deal next month but for now, we have in place the basics that allow business and projects to press on. Not everything is finalized and there is more detail to follow but we do have enough to allow progress.



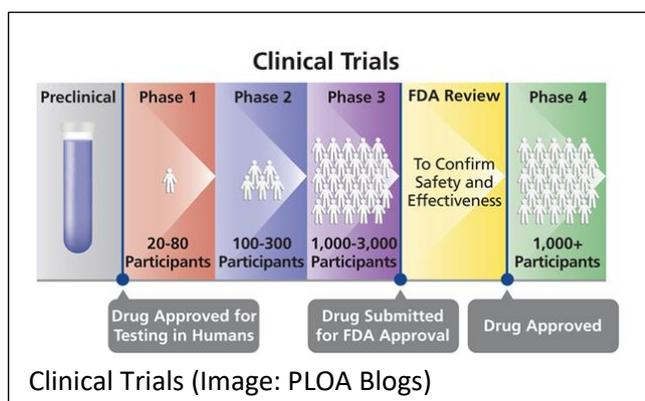
Image: Dmitry Kalinovsky/Shutterstock



For me, the real good news is the reaction of Big Pharma. A very large number of groups initiated drug investigations to develop effective vaccines. That several have been successful is due not just to hard work and good luck. Rather, it is a classic example of re-purposing existing programmes. These re-purposed programmes are also good examples of crashing the schedule. That we have at least 2 effective vaccines developed in the West to complement Chinese and Russian vaccines is due to international cooperation; China made available its sequencing of the virus DNA and data from other Covid vaccine programmes has been made available. The pandemic is called Covid-19 as the underlying virus is related to other better-known viruses in the SARS family. Big Pharma has been able to call on experience of dealing with deadly viruses such as Ebola and SARS using starter vaccines developed to counters to the new virus. The race to develop an effective vaccine hinges around two key aspects: the technology underpinning the candidate vaccine and the clinical trials needed to check safety and effectiveness.

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Having a base from which to develop a candidate vaccine gave developers a head start and cut development time significantly. The important project management aspect was the way that all the development teams (and there are 232 vaccines in development of which 60 are in clinical trials globally) were able to reduce the usually long lead times for the multiple phases of the trials (see graphic right). Reducing lead times was achieved by using a different type of candidate vaccine which is faster to develop. Also, the years of hanging around in between each phase was eliminated. **Dr Mark Toshner**, who has been involved in the trials at sites in Cambridge, told the BBC the idea that it took 10 years to



trial a vaccine was misleading. Delays occur in the process of writing grant applications, having them rejected, writing them again, getting approval to do the trial, negotiating with manufacturers, and trying to recruit enough people to take part. This can take years to get from one phase to the next. According to a BBC report, the unparalleled scientific push to make the trials happen, the droves of people willing to take part, and of course the money blew many of the usual hold-ups aside.

## **BAD NEWS**

The rapid development of multiple Covid-19 virus vaccines has been a triumph of medical and project management and it will be even more important in coming months as a new mutated variant strikes. This variant was first identified in UK, by the Covid-19 Genomics UK (COG-UK) consortium, which undertakes random genetic sequencing of positive Covid-19 samples around the UK. According to the British Medical Associations, the consortium is a partnership of the UK's four public health agencies, as well as the Wellcome Sanger Institute and 12 academic institutions.

Since being set up in April 2020, COG-UK has sequenced 140 000 virus genomes from people infected with Covid-19. COG-UK reports outbreaks, identifies variants and publishes weekly reports (<https://www.cogconsortium.uk/data/>). Their data shows that much of the increase in UK cases can be attributed to this mutant form. It seems likely that similar mutations have occurred elsewhere in the world as not all the outbreaks overseas can be accounted for by contract tracing to UK. Wherever it came from, it has caused most of UK to go into lockdown once again.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

As I survey the project scene from my eyrie here at Chateau Berger, it looks like we are moving into an interesting environment. The economy is in a poor state, due in part to the impact of the virus; working conditions in some industries are almost impossible but many project teams are still able to work, and this will be important in the months ahead as we greet the new normal outside the EU.

We have had some great successes in non-commercial and environmental projects, we have had our best year for cutting carbon emissions and in progressing towards our zero carbon aim so it is all to play for. The resurgence of community spirit will serve us well so long as we can maintain it. All we now need is for our government to realise that it will be PMs (not OIL) who drag us into the new normal.

I wish you all a Happy New Year! Live long and manage projects!

## 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. His consulting work has taken him to Japan, Taiwan, USA and Russia. Past Chair 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, for seven years, 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. He is currently Chairman of the British Standards Institute project management committee. 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](mailto:miles.shepherd@msp-ltd.co.uk).