

Is your IT project about to crash and burn? ¹

Yogi Schulz

Organizations regularly confront IT projects with problematic prospects that are not progressing as expected. It's not a pretty sight.

As the PMO leader, your nagging feeling tells you something is wrong. You definitely don't want the failure of a project to damage your reputation, your organization's reputation or its carefully cultivated brand. Nor do you want others in the organization to view the project as a boondoggle or a career-killing project.

Here is a list of the top reasons for IT project failure. For each reason, the questions will help you, as the PMO leader, narrow in on the problem that needs to be solved to save an IT project. Acting on the problematic answers with the project sponsor and project manager will help you recover the project from crashing and burning.

Insufficient planning

The project may fail because the planning process was shortened due to time pressure to accelerate progress. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately address the planning process:

- Is the project charter sufficiently complete to form the basis for planning the project?
- Is the project management plan sufficiently detailed to form the basis for a rational implementation of the project?
- Is there a reasonably complete risk register?

Inadequate leadership

The project may fail because of inadequate leadership. The PMO can ask these questions to deal adequately with leadership:

- Is the project sponsor engaged?
- Has someone oriented the project sponsor?
- Does the project manager have enough experience, given the characteristics of the project?

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- Have either of the individuals in these roles ended up in their roles more by chance rather than by conscious selection?

Unclear goals and objectives

The project may fail due to unclear goals and objectives. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately address goals and objectives:

- How measurable are the goals and objectives?
- Given the constraints of skills, experience and budget, how realistic are the goals and objectives?
- Do the goals and objectives focus on business value, not technical details?

Apply the [SMART](#) framework with the team to clarify goals and objectives.

Lack of resource planning

The project may fail because the planning process did not pay enough attention to resource management. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately address resource management:

- What team members with what technical and non-technical skills and experiences are required? Do they exist on the team?
- What knowledge resources does the project lack? Can we hire experts or provide training to build the skills required for my team?
- About how long will each team member be needed? Are any of them working on other projects now? Could they be recalled before this project is completed?
- Are there cultural differences within the team that can create misunderstandings, tensions or even conflicts?
- What facilities are needed? Do we have the office space, desks, computers, and meeting rooms that are necessary for the team to work effectively?
- Which suppliers will we rely on? Are their skills and availabilities sufficient to support the team?

Warning signs ignored

The project may fail because the leadership and team are ignoring warning signs of project difficulties. The PMO can ask these questions to respond appropriately to project warning signs:

- Is the project sponsor repeatedly absent?

- Is the project behind schedule?
- Is the project trending over budget?
- Has the review of multiple project deliverables revealed quality deficiencies?
- Are team members leaving the project?
- Has the project manager been replaced?
- Have members of the project steering committee disappeared or resigned?

Communication gaps

The project may fail due to a lack of internal communication about the project. The PMO can ask these questions to close communication gaps:

- Does the organization have a conceptual understanding of the project, its goal and its benefits?
- Did the project team create a communication plan?
- Does the project team regularly communicate status and successes through various channels?

Scope creep

The project may fail due to the well-intentioned acceptance of additional scope to satisfy key stakeholders. However, the added work is ultimately overwhelming the team. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately address scope creep:

- Has the team accepted additional functions or work that can be deferred?
- Has the project steering committee urged the project manager to accept additional functions or work that can be deferred?
- Has the project implemented and defended a scope management process?

Unclear organization

The project may fail because of an unclear project organization that is without accountability. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately address the project organization:

- Who is the project sponsor? No one or more than one is usually a problem.
- Who is the project manager? A self-managed team without a project manager is always a problem.
- Who are the members of the project team? Does each one have a reasonably clear sense of their role?

- Who are the members of the project steering committee? No one or too many is usually a problem.
- Are there more part-time team members than full-time ones?
- Are there more consultants on the team than employees?

Unrealistic expectations

The project may fail because of unrealistic expectations that exceed the capability of the team and the organization. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately understand the unrealistic expectations:

- Can the goals and objectives be achieved sensibly with the planned team, its experience, and the approved budget?
- How detailed and realistic is the project schedule?
- Does the list of risks on the risk register suggest unrealistic expectations?

Lack of operational metrics

The project may fail due to a lack of operational metrics that prevent the organization from knowing the accurate status of the project and its progress. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately address operational metrics:

- Have a few easy-to-measure operational metrics been defined?
- Is the data to calculate the operational metrics being routinely collected?
- Are the operational metrics being reported regularly?

Lack of project visibility

The project may fail due to the lack of project visibility in the minds of the team, stakeholders and the broader organization. The PMO can ask these questions to adequately address project visibility:

- How well do the team members know the status of other parts of the project?
- How well are stakeholders aware of the goal and general status of the project?
- Does the project document its decisions and work? Are the associated artifacts easily accessible?

As a PMO leader, you can collaborate with the project sponsor and project manager to identify actions that address the concerns identified by asking the questions above. Those actions will position IT projects for successful completion.

About the Author



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Yogi Schulz has over 40 years of Information Technology experience in various industries. Yogi works extensively in the petroleum industry to select and implement financial, production revenue accounting, land & contracts and geotechnical systems. He manages projects that arise from changes in business requirements, from the need to leverage technology opportunities and from mergers. His specialties include IT strategy, web strategy and systems project management.

Mr. Schulz regularly speaks to industry groups and writes a regular column for [IT World Canada and for Engineering.com](#). He has written for Microsoft.com and the Calgary Herald. His writing focuses on project management and IT developments of interest to management. Mr. Schulz served as a member of the Board of Directors of the PPDM Association for twenty years until 2015. Learn more at <https://www.corvelle.com/>. He can be contacted at yogischulz@corvelle.com

His new book, co-authored by Jocelyn Schulz Lapointe, is "[A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide: Improving Project Performance](#)."