

**EXPERT OPINION:** NIGEL BAGLEY of Bsquared Consulting warns against going too far too soon.

# PM and PSA: who needs it?

History is littered with examples of aborted and abandoned projects, cost overruns, missed deadlines and failures to meet quality specifications. Sadly, many of these involve the implementation and deployment of IT systems.

Research from the Royal Academy of Engineering and the British Computer Society (April 2004) suggests that fewer than one in five of all UK IT projects can be considered truly successful.

There is no shortage of reports and articles examining the root causes of many of these failures. To quote John McDermid, professor of software engineering at the University of York: "Projects are often poorly defined, codes of practice are frequently ignored and there is a woeful inability to learn from past experience."

Further, a simple search for UK websites generated 567 potential vendors of various methodologies and tools available to help satisfy the requirement for effective project management and administration. There is clearly a desperate need and a powerful thirst for support in this area.

Clearly, it makes sense to automate any dynamic process which requires the manipulation of large amounts of data with complex dependencies on which you may want to play scenarios – the degree of automation and functionality obviously varying on application and environment.

This is particularly true for large, complex and diverse organisations running a portfolio of programmes and projects.

However, just as deploying a manual system is no guarantee of a successful project outcome, automation will not in itself improve the odds.

In common with many of the more sophisticated and established methodologies/tools presented in manual form, automated applications appear to be an attractive proposition – and certainly they offer the full spectrum of functionality required by planners, administrators and managers.

The advantage of some of these advanced project management and PSA tools is their ability to integrate into the

company's wider information architectures such as resource management or finance.

So given the undoubted need for effective project management and the availability and deployment of sound methodologies and robust applications, why do such a large proportion of projects fail to deliver?

Perhaps the answer lies in the matching of an appropriate application for the task in hand and its implementation and deployment in the organisation.

There is always a temptation to go for the most advanced solution and so what is often sold/procured is a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

The sheer sophistication and complexity of these systems, whilst very necessary for large complex applications,



**Nigel Bagley: map the requirements**

required to 'feed the beast' and information fatigue/overload is an inevitable consequence.

This can cause a perfectly serviceable application to fall into disrepute – in extreme cases this loss of credibility leads to abandonment at worst, and at best a very expensive way to pay expenses.

It pays to spend time early on mapping the requirement – what capability the organisation really needs to be able to function effectively – and assessing the company's maturity, sophistication and ability to afford and handle any potential solution (the environmental and commercial constraints).

Secure a board-level sponsor and consult widely, both within the organisation's potential user and stakeholder populations and among

existing users elsewhere, with a view to agreeing the general functionality (project management and/or administration, decision support), the specific application requirements (resource planning, time recording, billing) and accessibility (standalone, networked, web-enabled).

At the outset, it is wise to acquire only the functionality needed now and in the immediate future – but to go for a system that is scalable so that enhancements can be added as the organisation matures and develops.

This effort spent on procuring the right system will be even more worthwhile if the implementation is as carefully planned as the physical installation.

Introducing a new way of working or automating a manual system will involve some process engineering and possibly changes to the organisational structure and allocation of resources.

What are often overlooked are the soft issues around the organisation's culture and values, and the capability of its people to absorb change and operate in different ways.

This may necessitate considerable preparatory work before the company and its people are capable of maximising benefit from the investment. Monitoring performance against expectations will soon reveal the effectiveness of the implementation and the business benefit delivered.

So, to tackle the headline question: who needs project management and PSA?

In today's complex and competitive environment, we probably all do. As with all things, appropriate tools will deliver the greatest benefit.

Don't, however, ignore or underestimate the soft issues around the implementation – especially the cultural, process and organisational issues. You should then be able to steer your organisation through the change and embed the new process and tools into routine operations.

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