

Why IT Projects Fail

By Andy Quick

A majority of all Information Technology projects are delivered over budget, behind schedule, and fall short of business expectations. Many consulting companies have built practices around helping their clients increase their chances for project success. You can select from a huge list of books dedicated to the subject of IT project management. Universities and technical training companies have created courses and curriculums on the topic of IT project management. You can join professional project management associations dedicated to helping their members get better at project management. Advisory companies and research groups have produced white papers that analyze the root cause of disastrous projects.

Even with the existence of all these resources, technology projects continue to fail a majority of the time. Unfortunately, most research, consulting groups, books, and associations fail to identify People as the single biggest reason why IT projects fail. The Standish group completed a survey of executives' opinions of why IT projects fail. The results are interesting¹:

Project Success Factors	% of Responses
1. User Involvement	15.9%
2. Executive Management Support	13.9%
3. Clear Statement of Requirements	13.0%
4. Proper Planning	9.6%
5. Realistic Expectations	8.2%
6. Smaller Project Milestones	7.7%
7. Competent Staff	7.2%
8. Ownership	5.3%
9. Clear Vision & Objectives	2.9%
10. Hard-Working, Focused Staff	2.4%
Other	13.9%

Notice that numbers 7 and 10 in the list are about people (competency and work ethic). Although these results are based on real opinions of executives, I wonder if they stopped to think that all these success factors are dependant upon people more than any other item in the list. Although many factors contribute to the success of a given project, the selection, development, and happiness of people is by far the most important. This article describes all of these factors and attempts to show how the people dimension reigns supreme.

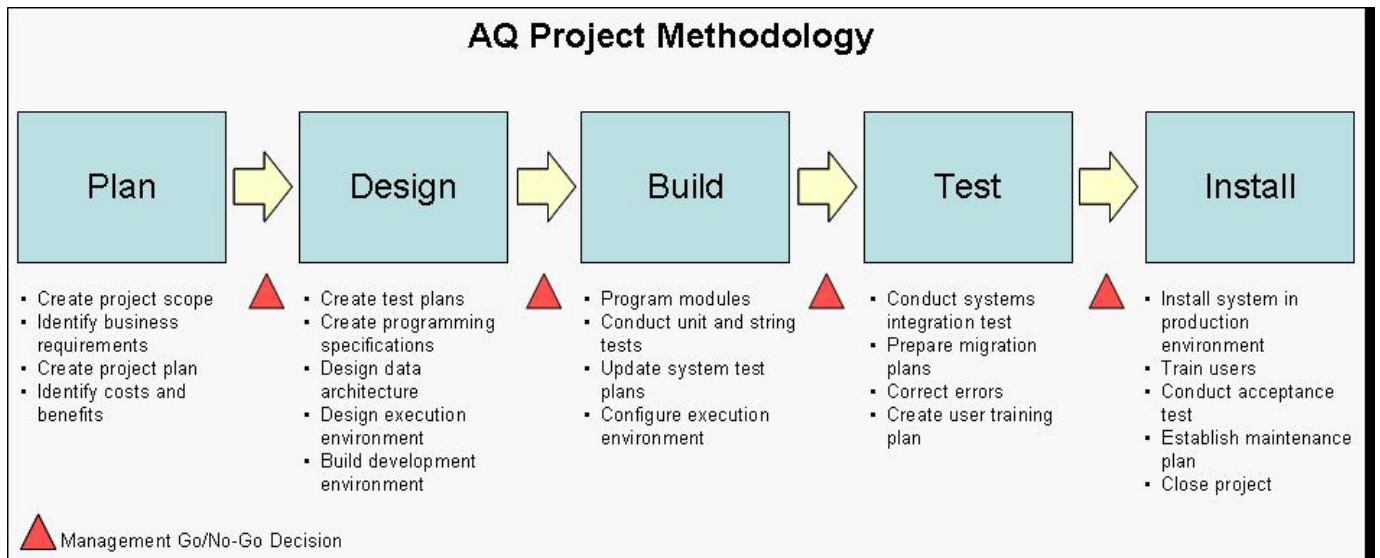
The Top 5

I contend that there are 5 primary reasons why IT projects fail to deliver on their promises: Process, Sponsorship, Technology, Expectation Management, and People. You can categorize these success factors any number of ways, but its easier to keep the categories simple.

Process

Rooted in principles of quality, following a robust delivery process can help to ensure a successful project delivery. Most IT companies have their own process of methodology for project delivery. Associations such as the Project Management Institute promote a series of processes to ensure project success. The U.S. Department of Defense established the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) to advance the practice of software engineering because quality software that is produced on schedule and within budget is a critical component of U.S. defense systems.

Following a standard IT delivery process can mitigate many risks to a successful project delivery. Usually, a thorough IT delivery methodology includes a series of pre-determined phases and checkpoints at the beginning or end of each phase that promote a go/no-go approach. Additionally, most processes have a set of underlying management control processes that span all phases. An example IT project delivery process might look something like:



Incidentally, I made up the methodology above for example purposes only. If you've seen it before somewhere, then it is by pure coincidence. However, most delivery processes have similar phases and steps. Following a methodology or process can increase your chances for a successful project delivery because:

- Quality is built into each phase
- Checkpoints are taken along the way to prevent failures before they happen

- Resource and time estimates are more accurate since all of the tasks are defined in advance of the project

Good people can make a project successful without a formal process...

Sponsorship

Ever been on a project and half way through you realize you don't know who you're doing it for? Ever been on a project that takes on a "life of its own"? Lack of project sponsorship is almost a sure fire way to cause a project to fail. Someone must be responsible for paying for the project, prioritizing requirements, removing political roadblocks and reminding the project team why the project is being undertaken.

Good people wont let a project continue without a sponsor...

Technology

Although very rare, technology problems can prevent a project from being successful. Some projects attempt to implement bleeding edge technologies that simply have not matured. As a result, the cost and schedule requirements of a project may expand.

Good people find creative ways around technology limitations...

Expectation Management

Project success or failure can be singularly determined by the degree to which management's expectations are met. In the early days of IT projects, business users would help document or verbalize system requirements and then the project team would go behind a curtain and build a system. Many times the documented requirements fell short of the sponsor's expectations. Why? Usually, requirements specify what a system should do, *but not how it should be used*. A good practice is to keep the user community engaged throughout the entire development process, showing them what to expect when the project will complete even if the system is incomplete.

Good people continuously keep project stakeholders informed of progress, issues, and risks...

People

In the end, it takes people to implement projects. The ability to manage expectations, involve users, keep executive management informed, escalate issues, and get the job done is a function of the quality of the people engaged in the project. Quality includes technical competency, professionalism, work ethic, organizational skills, and interpersonal skills.

If you are in charge of managing an IT project, start by finding the very best people for your project team. Do whatever it takes to hire, steal and beg for people that have the right set of technical skills and soft skills to get the job done. I have witnessed many a project fail due to a poor project team. Even with the very best processes, methodologies, guidelines, technology, and sponsorship, a project will not be successful if the quality of the people is lacking.
