
Turning around a failing IT project

All too often, high-profile IT projects feature in the national press for the wrong reasons. The ambition and complexity of today's technology agenda is testing our ability to deliver. Programmes increasingly have big budgets and global scope, highly integrated architectures and complex management structures. In this environment, IT managers are struggling to keep pace and the early warning signs of trouble are often missed. The net result? Corrective action comes too late and significant intervention is needed to get the project back on track.

Projects fail for many different reasons. So how can IT managers spot a troubled project? And what steps can they take to support the turnaround process?

Turning around an IT project in difficulty

Recognise the warning signs

Spotting a project in serious difficulty early is critical

Distinguishing a well-managed project needing support from a project on the verge of failure can be difficult. A budget exceeded, or a milestone missed, is not a clear-cut sign: even the best run projects can face these problems. However, design decisions unravelling in the build process, end-users querying the business case and large-scale change requests all suggest a project lacking solid foundations. Repeated requests for budget and timeline extensions, strained supplier relationships and high-risk external dependencies can indicate significant project management issues. Spotting a project in serious difficulty early is critical: otherwise the cost of a turnaround – rework, delay and write-off – can easily invalidate the project's business case.

Set out a turnaround strategy

Having identified the problem, you'll need time to take stock. Buy this time by agreeing an action plan with the Steering Group or Governance Board and enrolling senior management into the decision-making process. The current project manager may not be objective enough to own the turnaround process, so consider establishing an independent review. Head the review team with a respected leader who has the experience to cut to the core issues and the judgement to make pragmatic trade-offs. Have the team examine the business case, existing capability and progress to date. If the business case remains sound and the assets built to date have value, think about taking corrective action while the project continues. If the business case is in question and team productivity is low, consider a project stand-down. Sunk cost should be kept out of the decision, but recognise that reputations are likely to be at risk. Determine the project leadership team going forward and work the recommendation with the Steering Group.

Validate the governance process

Very often the board of a failing project is made up of the busiest of executives, or those that are neither affected nor motivated by the project's success. In either case, the project is missing the direction and support needed to put things right. You must be confident that the Chair of the Steering Group is still the best person for the role. Can they hold the board in line and lead an effective decision making process? Ensure that the business sponsor has a vested interest in the project's success, carries the confidence of the business community and

is empowered to speak on their behalf. The main supplier (where there is one) should have a voice at the table to ensure transparency and provide access to their market insight. Board members must feel accountable and project success should be built into their yearly performance measures. Spend time clarifying and bringing new members up to speed on their responsibilities. Finally, ensure the Board is well briefed on the project's status and the key decisions to be made.

Simplify the plan

Many turnaround projects end up chasing moving goalposts as the business develops faster than the project's delivery cycle. The business will not slow its pace. Instead, the project must adapt. Ramping up resources in a turnaround scenario should be a last resort. It is often better to challenge the work left to do by examining the cost and benefit of long lead-time items. Resist the temptation of accelerated timelines and aggressive parallel activity: the team will not be up to the task. Look to reduce risk by breaking ties with external dependencies. Push for a conservative delivery plan and offer a follow-on phase that completes any remaining objectives. The knowledge gained from an early first release and feedback from a live end-user community can make a two-stage delivery just as effective. This claim may bring robust challenge from the business so have the Board on side early. Get the story straight and rehearse it well. Be accurate, honest and demonstrate lessons learned from the past.

Set a new standard

The project team is likely to be feeling battered and bruised. Morale may be low, and productivity and quality might have suffered as a result. People are the major asset of any project and you need to restore the team's confidence fast. Work with the project manager to identify those that are carrying the project and those that are holding it back. Deal with the detractors first, working through the HR implications. Bolster the leadership team next by clarifying accountabilities, fostering collaboration and agreeing performance milestones. Where possible, bring in experienced delivery experts to shore up capability gaps and introduce project best practices. Ensure there is a balance between delivering the plan and building internal capability. Make yourself visible and communicate the new standard of acceptable quality. Look for the right behaviours and celebrate a few good examples.

Invest in relationships

Don't expect to change the business's scepticism with anything other than delivery results. They will have heard it all before. Carefully choose someone to manage the business relationship and give them a lead position on the project management team. Ensure they feel jointly accountable for the project's success and specifically for delivering the benefits case. Involve the business community in the selection process and push hard to get someone with the right level of seniority and subject matter expertise. Few business people have experience operating within large project environments, so support them to be successful. Agree the ground rules up-front for negotiating project scope in exchange for business support. Finally, make sure the project team is managing the broader stakeholder group: the project is still in the early stages of recovery, and strong relationships may be important further on down the line.

See it through

The path to project recovery is rarely straightforward. While the guidelines above may help, project recovery is so much more than just applying a set of rules and executing a 'standard plan'. With investment at risk,

reputations on the line and the demands of the business escalating, only clear thinking, decisive action and tough negotiation can take the heat out of a project at boiling point.

