
5 Project Points of Failure to Avoid

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Experts lay out five of the most common areas where projects will miss the mark and cause undue harm to your business and the players involved.

Sure, falling in love with technology can cause big project headaches, but rarely does technology alone cause an IT project to fail.

“Yes, IT sometimes falls in love with its technology, but most failures come about, not as a result of the technology, but as a result of the management of technology,” says Michael Krigsman of Asuret, a project management consultancy based in Brookline, Mass. “The consequences of failure can be dramatic, from a technical standpoint and especially from a business standpoint. And the sad part is that most of these failures could be avoided.”

Baseline talked to Krigsman and a number of other IT project experts who identified five points of failure most likely to torpedo projects.

1. Lack of Preparation

One of the most obvious reasons a project fails is poor planning at the outset. Managers who fail to properly scope a project, apply risk management principles and plan in time for quality assurance and security assurance are courting ruin. Some experts advocate implementing an exploratory phase during the chartering process, which allows project stakeholders to plan and create a wish list—with accompanying budget—that will give management a good handle on the process before the project is approved.

“The reason why a lot of projects fail is lack of preparation in the first place,” says Steve McConnell, CEO of Construx Software, a Bellevue, Wash.-based software consulting firm. “If you go to the exploratory phase, part of the purpose of that phase is to do some of that preparation before a project has even been approved. So the activity itself actually reduces the chance that the project will fail if, in fact, a project is fully launched.”

*See also: [8 Ways To Save Your Next Project](#)

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2. Business Misfit

Even when an IT project is implemented beautifully, it can be a failure. If a technology or a process doesn't fit with the business needs or sync with the way the organization operates the project has the potential to be a waste of money. IT teams need to be in touch with business stakeholders to get a clear picture of the business needs to ensure projects fit within the business schema.

“The only ones who can determine what is needed for the business are the owners of the business processes,” says Mike Sisco, president of MDE Enterprises, a Columbia, Tenn.-based IT management training firm. “IT is not in a great position to know what's the best for the billing organization, or the accounting organization, or the operational people out there selling widgets and servicing clients.”

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3. Unilateral Decision Making

When IT fails to involve business leaders while planning new initiatives that affect business operations, the technology department risks a business misfit. When business leaders decide IT needs to do a project with specific parameters without asking about the project's feasibility, they risk a poorly implemented project or one that goes above cost and past deadlines.

“The first thing you can do very early is go through a project chartering exercise,” McConnell says. “Project chartering involves all of the project representatives, so it must involve technical staff and leadership and also involve the business stakeholders in the project.”

Putting everyone at the same table ensures that nobody makes a shortsighted unilateral decision.

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4. Inflexibility

Agile businesses that can move quickly to adjust to the market's changing needs are able to put themselves in a position of growth. Unfortunately, some IT projects can be so rigid that they fail to allow the business to change processes or adjust to new situations quickly enough to profit from them. This inflexibility is a project killer.

"The dynamics of the business may change, so your project focus or your project initiatives focus needs to be somewhat dynamic or fluid and to be able to adapt to that business change," says Sisco, who advises CIOs to regularly scan their roster of projects to ensure they meet business needs today and kill the ones that don't.

5. Scope Creep

Lack of preparation typically begets the kitchen-sink syndrome, where project leaders add in every kind of feature and the kitchen sink to boot. This is the opposite problem of point-of-failure No. 4, where IT and business managers are so "flexible" that they bloat the project costs with a million bells and whistles added once the project gets underway.

This is yet another problem that stems from lack of preparation. A rigorous chartering process and exploratory phase should be able to give a better picture of actual project scope and costs, which McConnell says is almost always two to three times more than initial estimates.

Then, it is a matter of keeping the reins on a project to balance agility with the budget and timeframe. Leading organizations such as the Project Management Institute recommend implementing a project change-management process to enable flexibility without going overboard with unnecessary changes.

"I think that's basically just good basic blocking and tackling that is part of good project management," McConnell says of post-chartering project control measures.

*See also: [8 Ways To Save Your Next Project](#)