

What do we mean by success?

 By Louise Worsley

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The most frequently cited definition of project failure is the failure to meet time, cost, or scope targets. However, even when these three have been met, success can remain elusive.

In reality, success seems to depend more on whether the project solved the problem it was meant to solve, whether the customer uses it and whether the project was a valuable use of time and money.

Often the response to the above questions is 'No', leaving many project managers feeling cheated or uneasy: they feel they have no 'say' in these aspects of a project and are being unfairly judged. But are they?

What research says

Most researchers in this area, point out that judgement about project failure is essentially a personal perception. This reflects local circumstances, expectations and the degree to which they have been impacted. It is not uncommon, even within a small business, for one group to perceive a project as a failure while others see it as a success.

When asking the questions

- *"Why are some projects perceived as failures when they actually meet time, cost, and scope targets?"* and
- *"Why are some projects considered a success, even when they are late and over budget?"*

The rather unexciting, but profoundly important answer is:

"...if there is a high level of satisfaction concerning the project outcome among key people ... the project is considered a success." (Cleland and King)

Or, to put it more bluntly, if the right people consider a project a success, it is a success.

This knowledge specifically and valuably indicates what project managers should do to be considered successful. They simply have to make sure they know what the 'right people' are looking for, and make sure the 'right people' know what to expect - and then deliver that.

Success factors for projects

Slevin and Pinto (early pioneers in this area) identified ten success factors for projects.

Of the ten:

- Establishing the project mission - is a factor that stands out as being very poorly done - and almost completely absent in failed projects
- Adequate monitoring and control (*two different things*) of the important aspects of the project - is evident in so many failed projects by its absence
- A lack of timely and effective troubleshooting, which means identifying and resolving issues, not day-to-day project problems and project risks - is a final key factor

It is important to understand that the factors affecting success and their relative importance do vary across project implementation stages.

In the early stages, strategic factors such as the 'project mission' predominate.

In the execution stages the tactical factors such as 'client involvement' rise in importance. 'Communication' and 'troubleshooting' do not have a 'season' - they have to be attended to throughout the project.

The findings of [PiCubed](#), of [CITI](#), and of researchers across the world, are that in the absence of appropriate attention to these success factors, projects do fail. The message is clear...

- If the project mission is not understood, agreed, re-focused and evaluated continuously throughout the project and management actions are not focused to deliver the mission - projects fail.
- Planning is important but monitoring and control is king. You cannot monitor without a plan, and it is the execution of the plan, that really matters - and execution means monitoring and control.
- Bad things happen on complex projects - plans only cater for the expected - so you either engage in troubleshooting, working closely with sponsors, or don't do project management!

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