



Healthchecks – the starting point for improving projects performance.

As a Programme and Project Management Consultant of many years standing, I've lost count of the number of clients who have asked me to "improve our projects delivery", "make us **better** at project management" or simply "sort out this mess". In order to understand what **better** project delivery means for a specific organisation, a baseline for where they are now needs to be established, typically to answer the following questions:

- ✓ Do you know what your issues or problem areas are?
- ✓ Do you know what better project delivery (success) looks like in this organisation?
- ✓ How will you measure any increase in performance improvement?

In order to answer these basic questions I undertake a healthcheck or review, usually based on a maturity model approach, benchmarking programme or project performance against current best practice. The Healthcheck includes interviews with key staff, an examination of all current documentation and processes and audits of a small number of projects or programmes to examine whether reality matches the theory. Common themes emerge from these healthchecks and here are my top ten:

1. **No inherent "projects culture" - "blame the project manager"**

Organisations do not effectively challenge their investment policies or learn from their successes and mistakes. Projects aren't fully integrated with corporate governance and are often launched to fix immediate problems rather than to deliver business strategy or goals. Senior managers and users should "own" and be personally accountable for projects from initial idea through scrutiny of business cases ending with the delivery and review of benefits.

There is often little appreciation of how a project is different from business as usual within the user community. The user community may not understand the project lifecycle and are keen to see early deliverables and actions. This puts pressure on project managers to move to early project implementation, before the full scope and requirements have been agreed and the key questions answered. The full requirements are never tied down and change control is at best ineffective or at worst non-existent.

2. **Poor Stakeholder Management – "engage and influence"**

There is often little stakeholder analysis carried out in the early stages of a project. This means that the right business stakeholders are not involved early enough in the lifecycle leading to inappropriate Project Board selection, poor stakeholder engagement and a lack of quality in requirements capture. Further fallout from this is ineffective communications planning, poor dissemination of information and bad meeting management.

3. **Poor Project Boards' performance – "ineffective direction"**

The lack of good Project Boards is the single biggest contributor to poor project performance. In many organisations Project Boards don't exist and where they do, its role and individual responsibilities are often misunderstood and badly executed. Typically, at the start of a new project, organisations round up "the usual suspects", often appointing Board members for political reasons, rather than the role they are to play. The result is that Boards become unwieldy, degenerate into committees or "talking shops", meetings often go on for several hours and decisions don't get made. Other issues include the lack of empowerment of Board members, which means that Board decisions have to be ratified (and are often overturned) by other groups or committees, extending the decision making cycle.

4. **Poor reports and meetings – "decision support"**



Many progress and Highlight reports aren't "fit for purpose", they concentrate on the past, with little forecast information and no focus on decisions required. They fall into the "what I did on my holidays" essay category, which are rarely read by busy Project Boards. Reports should be easy to interpret and provide decision support through dashboards, traffic lights and decisions required. They should be short and to the point to focus Project Boards on their duties of intervention management and decision making.

Board Meetings are often ineffective and Board members reluctant to make timely decisions. This is often not their fault but results from bad meeting agendas, which aren't focussed on the decisions required, and the lack of timely information from project managers, as the supporting paperwork is often seen for the first time at the meeting.

5. Lack of project assurance – “right first time, most of the time”

Independent project assurance is the least well understood project technique, which leads to poor requirements capture and expensive and unnecessary rework. Project Boards don't delegate their assurance responsibilities effectively and often review and sign off documents which are beyond their expertise and knowledge. Document review is poorly executed, plans don't allow for review time and reviewers aren't notified of their review role or key dates until it is too late. Quality is free, lack of attention to project assurance is a false economy, project assurance pays for itself and is a quick win.

6. Lack of (tailored) project methods - “inconsistency of approach”

A lot of organisations simply don't have a method at all, which results in project managers doing their own thing. Where methods do exist, there is little appreciation of the need to tailor them to the size, risk and complexity of the project or the culture of the organisation, which is often reflected in the inappropriate use of elements within the method (sledgehammer to crack a nut!).

7. Lack of appropriate training – “for all stakeholders”

Engaging (and tailoring) the most appropriate method is not the only factor in project success, project management should be recognised as a core competency for an organisation. Most organisations recognise the need to train their project managers but they don't train stakeholders, project team members or Project Boards appropriately. Project Board members need to understand when to intervene effectively and when to challenge or make decisions. Attendance on a training course such as PRINCE2™ may equip your staff with a common language, a set of processes and some techniques, but it won't turn them into effective project managers overnight. That develops over time as the project manager puts what they have learnt into practice but step changes in performance are delivered through ongoing support and mentoring.

8. Risk identification not risk management – “reality and actions”

Risk Management is a “tick in the box” activity for many organisations. Much effort is expended in identifying and analysing risks, but ongoing ownership, mitigation and management of risk is poorly executed. Most risk registers aren't worth the paper they are written on, they are often very long, full of generic risks, concerns and issues rather than the real risks or threats to the project. The added value in risk management is identifying the mitigating actions and building them into project plans for tracking and management.

9. Poor Planning - “get real”

Plans are often works of fiction, created to meet fixed end dates or to keep users happy, rather than reflecting reality. Project Managers are guilty here for failing to push back. Plans are often created



through 1:1 meetings and there is little or no ratification of assumptions. Early sharing of project plans is seen as “dangerous” by some project managers as they “set expectations” within the user community.

Most plans pay scant regard to resource allocation and a plan that is not fully resourced up and agreed (before it is executed) with the resource owners is not a plan it's a schedule or a “to do” list. Plans should be developed through an iterative cycle, using planning workshops where possible to socialise plans early and set resource and timing expectations for the user and supplier communities.

10. Lack of a continuous improvement culture – “re-use don't re-invent”

There is often no evidence of continuous improvement, no appetite for post project reviews, no mechanism for collating lessons learned or ensuring actions are followed through and good practice is rarely disseminated. Projects continue to re-invent the wheel rather than reuse what has worked in the past, which would facilitate faster project start-up and more accurate plans.

Next steps...

Do any of the above issues sound familiar? If they do, you are not alone. Review your own organisation's approach, identify the gaps, prioritise the issues you face and develop an effective road map and timescale to improve projects performance.

Sue Vowler PPMRC, P2RC
Director, Project Angels Limited
Tel 05600 701985, Mob 07887 587551, email sue@project-angels.co.uk