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Learn from your mistakes

From Peter Jones

Further to your article about ill-conceived business investment in IT (Computer Weekly, 21 March), it should be added that inadequate post-implementation reviews (PIRs) are a significant contributor to project wastage.

Done accurately, yet sensitively and with all-party agreement, a PIR can provide a truly fantastic learning opportunity for the whole business. Indeed, some companies even have them as a part of their products' quality management systems (QMS).

Many QMS systems do not have defined PIR processes to integrate post-project conclusions into the business. Any decisions about improvements that can be made are reached inconsistently in closed meetings. There need to be coherent, plain-English guides written about the winning business rationales behind successful projects so that the wider business can benefit from the lessons learnt. An adjunct to this for employees would be itemised project histories maintained centrally as a guideline to individual project performance and learning needs.

Another factor in firms making ill-conceived investments is that benefit measurements may not be defined clearly enough to construct a realistic view of the success of projects. Cases can frequently be found where executives adding the benefits from their project programmes together substantially exceed their sales, revenue or cost savings for the period in question. Why? Because at least one project claimed

more than its fair share of the benefit for the same sales, income or efficiency measure. These are all areas that can be tackled easily.

More serious is the fact that PIR's are actually feared and deemed unpopular, leading managers to omit them altogether. In my experience, few companies have a learning-oriented culture that allows individuals and departments to be able to admit freely that things could have been done better. Learning and improvement cannot commence until there is a recognition and acceptance that more could have been done.

Many companies also find that the relevant business areas are "too busy" with day-to-day business needs or setting up their next raft of projects to contribute effectively to PIR activity. In addition, they often don't have the specialist project and business management skills needed to effect the necessary business change.

As an urgent first step, the need for project evaluation at closure must be embraced by more companies. Once project learning is embedded into corporate culture, fewer projects will be ill-conceived, and fewer projects will need to be terminated after business cases have been approved.

I live in hope that UK PLC will wake up to these flaws in its business processes, while endeavouring to bring the message personally to every client I work for. Please help me to spread this message further.

Peter Jones

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