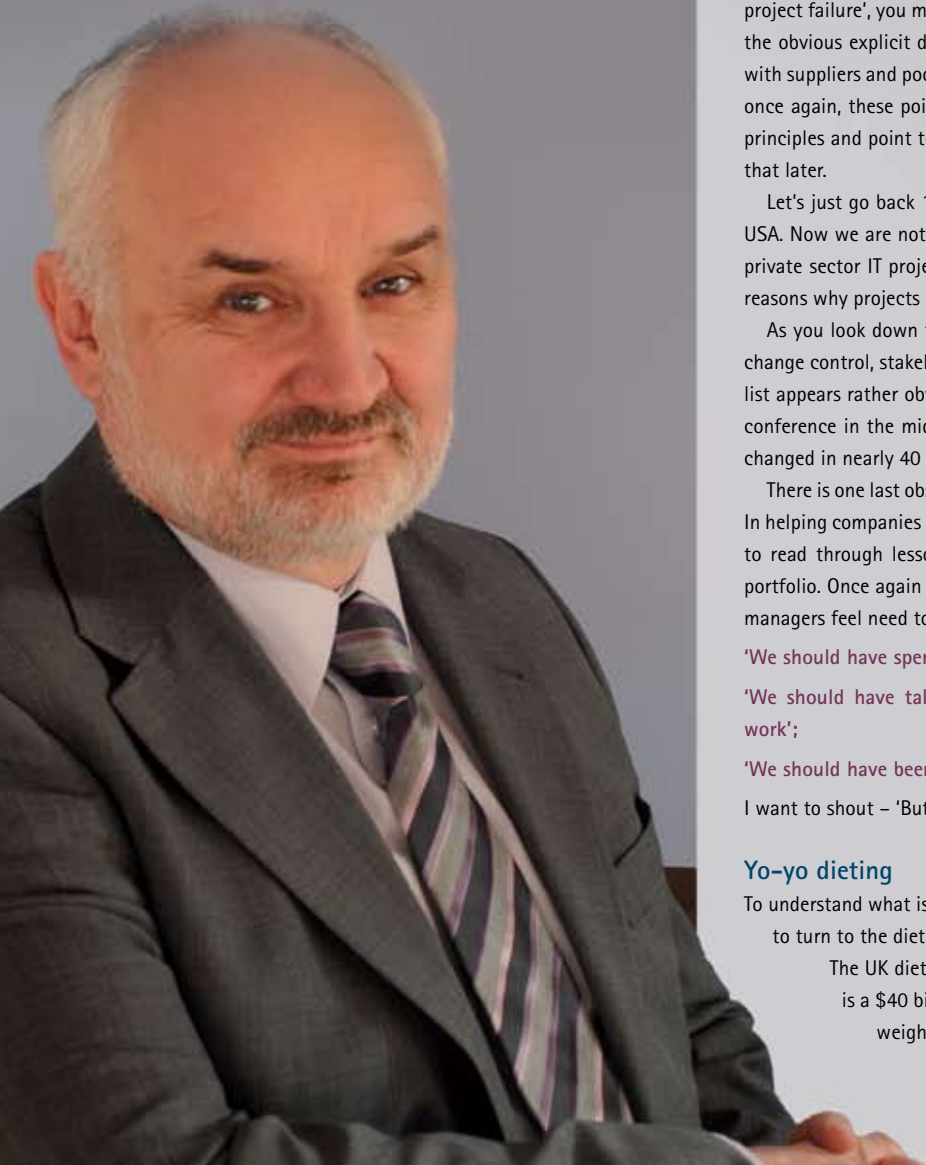




## Ingeniously simple but devilishly difficult?

By Adrian Dooley, director, The Projects Group



We know why projects go wrong, so why is project management history so littered with failures? As *Project Manager Today* approaches its 20th anniversary, Adrian Dooley, one of the magazine's original founders, looks at the quick fixes used by organisations in an attempt to solve the problem. He says they are like many dieters – doomed to failure. But it needn't be so.

For many years, commentators, magazines, consultancies and others have been producing lists of reasons why projects fail. We all want the magic solution, preferably as a quick fix, to ensure our projects deliver what was promised. It seems simple: analyse the causes of project failure and we could fix them once and for all.

Sometimes these 'failure' lists are based on surveys, sometimes on anecdotal evidence, and sometimes on audits of individual projects. The most recent is the National Audit Office report on the problems with the National Offender Management System (NOMS)<sup>1</sup>. Looking down the list of reasons why this project went wrong, you are struck by how obvious the problems are. The need to have senior management involvement, appropriate management structures, to control change and manage business change are all drummed into delegates on the most basic of project management courses.

Oh well! No point in crying over spilt milk; let's just learn from experience and not make the same mistakes next time. But there's the rub – we don't.

Obviously the NOMS project was a public sector IT project and five years ago the OGC published a document that analysed a range of public sector IT projects and the typical reasons for their failure<sup>2</sup>. Looking down the list of eight 'Common causes of project failure', you may be struck by some similarities with the NOMS report. There are the obvious explicit duplications such as senior management ownership, relationships with suppliers and poor basic project management skills, but beyond this it is clear that, once again, these points of failure are not complicated. They are actually very simple principles and point to an underlying and unchanging systemic problem – but more of that later.

Let's just go back 14 years to an oft-quoted report from the Standish Group in the USA. Now we are not just looking at UK public sector projects, but also US public and private sector IT projects. In its 'Chaos report' in 1995, Standish identified the top 10 reasons why projects were 'impaired' or 'cancelled'.

As you look down the list you'll see some old favourites such as executive support, change control, stakeholder management (user involvement) and so on. Once again the list appears rather obvious and banal. In fact, you can go back all the way to an IPMA conference in the mid-1970s to find that the reasons why projects fail haven't really changed in nearly 40 years.

There is one last observation on this before I start to address the underlying problems. In helping companies build a knowledge base of project management I often have cause to read through lessons learned reports to understand what is going on with their portfolio. Once again I am struck by the unchanging nature of the lessons that project managers feel need to be learned:

'We should have spent more time communicating with our stakeholders';

'We should have taken more time establishing the requirements before starting work';

'We should have been more rigorous in our change control'.

I want to shout – 'But you knew you had to do these things, so why didn't you?'

### Yo-yo dieting

To understand what is going on in the world of managing projects we need (obviously) to turn to the dieting industry.

The UK diet industry is estimated to be worth over £350 million; in the US it is a \$40 billion industry, but research suggests that 95% of people who lose weight through a diet put it back on again.

Diets such as Atkins, South Beach, F Plan and GI, along with dozens of others, prey on our inability to do something very

### National Audit Office NOMS 2009

- 1 There was inadequate oversight by senior management.
- 2 NOMS did not put the appropriate resources and structures in place to deliver such a complex project.
- 3 Programme management was poor in key aspects, including planning, financial monitoring and change control.
- 4 NOMS significantly underestimated the technical complexity of the project.
- 5 NOMS underestimated the need to invest in business change alongside the IT system.
- 6 NOMS' contractual arrangements with its key suppliers were weak and its supplier management poor.

### Office of Government Commerce (OGC) 2005

- 1 Lack of clear links between the project and the organisation's key strategic priorities, including agreed measures of success.
- 2 Lack of clear senior management and Ministerial ownership and leadership.
- 3 Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders.
- 4 Lack of skills and proven approach to project management and risk management.
- 5 Too little attention to breaking development and implementation into manageable steps.
- 6 Evaluation of proposals driven by initial price rather than long-term value for money (especially securing delivery of business benefits).
- 7 Lack of understanding of, and contact with, the supply industry at senior levels in the organisation.
- 8 Lack of effective project team integration between clients, the supplier team and the supply chain.

### Standish Group 1995

- 1 Incomplete requirements
- 2 Lack of user involvement
- 3 Lack of resources
- 4 Unrealistic expectations
- 5 Lack of executive support
- 6 Changing requirements & specifications
- 7 Lack of planning
- 8 Didn't need it any longer
- 9 Lack of IT management
- 10 Technology illiteracy

simple – 'Eat less, move more.' Losing weight really is that obvious, so why has such a vast industry arisen around such a simple concept? The answer is that it is simple, but it's not easy.

Research shows that quick-fix diets cause people to put more weight on in the long term. It also shows that many of the reasons why diets fail are environmental factors such as lack of family support, unrealistic expectations or feeling under pressure at work.

So, what has all this got to do with project management? Every time I look at the reasons why dieting doesn't work, I see parallels in the way companies try to fix their project management through a series of 'quick fixes' – a bit like the fad diets.

### The latest menus

In the 1980s the answer to all our problems was going to be scheduling software, in the '90s it was all about methodologies and in the 'noughties it has all been about qualifications. The failure of these quick fixes leads to cynicism about 'the latest pm initiative' (the demoralised dieter who then puts on even more weight) and what is sometimes referred to as the 'conspiracy of optimism'<sup>13</sup> (somehow doing the same old thing is going to have a different result this time).

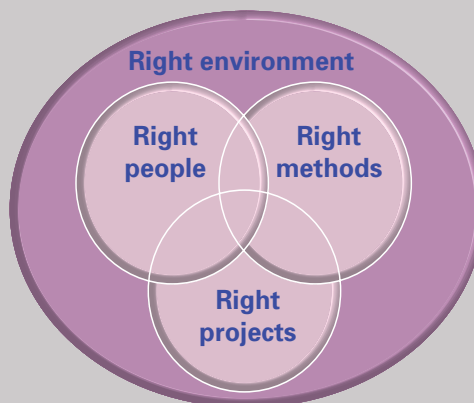
For someone to lose weight in a sustainable way they have to have the will power to create the right environment and change their lifestyle. This is a long-term process and never a quick fix. For an organisation consistently to improve its delivery of projects and programmes, senior management need the will power to change the environment, do the simple things (even if they are politically or commercially difficult) and recognise that benefits will not be magically achieved before the next annual report.

### What do we do?

In dieting the simple solution is obvious – 'eat less, move more' – and the not so easy approach is also well known – change your lifestyle. Can we extend the analogy to project management? I believe we

can. It's not quite as elegant as 'eat less, move more' but it addresses the fundamental nature of what we have to do.

Clearly, the first step to success is to pick the right projects. Let's make sure we stand a chance of success. Secondly, we need good, competent people and, thirdly, we need consistent but flexible management methods. Finally, all these seeds of success need a fertile environment in which to flourish. All of these can be brought together in an admittedly rather pithy pictorial concept:



At first sight I'm sure that this looks like simplistic platitudes that are so vague that no one can argue for or against them with any conviction. But our profession has been through over 30 years of fads and is now maturing to the extent that all the components are available to build the big picture and back up these simple concepts with real substance.

In fact, the various fads are all pieces of a jigsaw. Historically, the problem has not been that scheduling software, qualifications, maturity models, competency frameworks et al, are fundamentally flawed, it is simply that organisations have done them as individual initiatives without due consideration as to how they fit together. Once an individual initiative is seen not to work it is discredited (until the next re-organisation when new managers come in who didn't experience the

pain the last time).

Just as yo-yo dieting stresses the body and makes you more likely to gain weight, these yo-yo initiatives in project management put a strain on the organisation's ability to develop an holistic approach.

What we need is a robust but flexible framework in which to place the jigsaw pieces. In the US, the PMI's approach has many of the required pieces, but is extremely structured and, as a result, inflexible. In the UK the jigsaw pieces are more comprehensive but are produced by different bodies, such as the APM and OGC. As a result they don't always fit.

### Solving the problem

Where do we go next? I believe the world of project management is ready for an approach that is not easy. Its maturity as a discipline and as a profession means that it is ready to do the difficult things, but it needs a simple model as the basis for progress. As a profession we must work towards a common framework that melds bodies of knowledge, process models, maturity models, competency frameworks, project support guidelines, etc, into a series of compatible jigsaw pieces. From this, each organisation can derive a blueprint of what will enable it to be an effective deliverer of projects and programmes.

There is one final irony in all of this. The work to achieve an organisational environment that consistently delivers well is a programme of business change. It requires a portfolio of related projects that come together to deliver real bottom-line benefits. At a more detailed level, you could say it will need things like senior management commitment, clear understanding of objectives, good planning, change control, etc. As we know only too well – without these it will fail. What kind of people should we get to manage all this – some project and programme managers perhaps?

Our first lesson is simple: practise what we preach!

<sup>1</sup> The National Offender Management Information System, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, March 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Common Causes of Project Failure, OGC Best Practice, CP0015/01/05

<sup>3</sup> Mary McKinley at the APM Conference 2009