

Leading Successful Projects Insights from the Broadcasting and Media industries



Date: 23 July 2015

A research report by:

- Effie Konstantinou - University College London
- Ben Brownlee – British Broadcasting Corporation

“Talking with people across the broadcasting and media industries revealed that project management is a relatively young discipline.”

Introduction

Effie Konstantinou from University College London and Ben Brownlee from the BBC talk about their research into:

- what makes projects successful
- project professionalism and
- the link with commercial value

across the broadcasting and media industries.

We discussed these three topics over the past year with project sponsors, directors and senior managers. We spoke with people who have been involved in the delivery of some of the largest major events, programmes and infrastructure projects in the sector. Our research highlights some of the conditions that determine project success, the maturity of project management in this sector and the extent to which it is considered a profession.

This research report includes illustrative quotes from those who participated.

Project Management in broadcasting and media

“Project management is a way of giving myself a road map to success through what might be quite a complex and tricky set of issues to solve.”

The broadcasting and media industries are part of the creative industries which are defined as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport).

Even though these are mostly project-based industries, talking to sponsors, project directors and managers revealed that the traditional, inward-looking view of project management, which sees project management as a set of tools, techniques and methodologies that can be applied across projects, is not entirely helpful. In these industries, project management extends beyond the application of tools, techniques and methodologies and includes a wider range of skills and abilities that are required to make the most of creativity. This wider skill set includes advanced engagement and relationship building, change-orientated leadership and a significant focus on the business being the core part of the project.

“You have to be really organised to try and guarantee success, putting all of the processes and systems into place to plot your progress and look at your risks, but I think that’s probably only half of it. I think the other half is all about people, relationships, communications, engagement and culture change.”

a) Conditions for Project Success

The research highlights five conditions for success across this sector:

1. leading change within and across the project
2. defining success upfront
3. defining success ... beyond the iron triangle
4. using a tailored approach
5. using suitable language.

1. The power behind the throne

"I said, 'My job is to serve you because I've put the structures and the tools in place to enable you to make great telly'."

We found project leaders were typically characterised by intelligence, articulateness, shrewd judgment, empathy and a degree of self-awareness that is imposing. They use a range of styles, rarely using command and control or autocratic approaches.

On a daily basis the project leader spends most of their time on building relationships with people from around and beyond the business, restating the vision of the project, communicating the benefits, and making sure that people are engaged. This means that they have sufficient insight in the project to understand how they can contribute to its success.

With the members of their own teams, project leaders evaluate the emerging challenges and develop different courses of action to create a way forward. They think about and review new facts and figures, and new information that has come through the grapevine, in order to sustain the health of the project.

2. Defining success upfront

"[Success was] established right at the start and so when departments suddenly realised what they were moving into or what they had signed up to, there wasn't any opportunity for them to say, 'Oh, well, we didn't agree this', because all the senior directors had signed up."

Defining success upfront reflects good practice in planning, budgeting and resourcing and it helps to maintain the focus on the project. Projects are seen as temporary organisations of priorities, goals, resources, tools and techniques. In the broadcasting and media industries, which are creative and by nature dynamic industries, managing expectations and maintaining the necessary attention and focus on the initial purpose of the project can be challenging.

Clearly defining project success right at the start is an indispensable practice throughout the life and legacy of the project. The project directors and sponsors that we spoke to were passionate about the objectives of their project and how these contribute to the business.

3. Defining success ... beyond the iron triangle

"The project can't be seen as being something that's done to the business; it has to be something the business wants and can see the benefit of happening."

"Project success is about the contribution to the growth of the business in ways that harness the creativity of the workforce and relate to the interests of the audience."

While the 'iron triangle' is used, it is often only an indicator for success. Delivering a project on time, within budget and scope is important and of course desirable but it is not synonymous with project success. In the broadcasting and media industries, project success is also about the contribution to the growth of the business in ways that harness the creativity of the workforce and relate to the interests of the audience. For those we spoke to, indicators are important, but their primary focus is on ensuring that the project integrates with the purposes and ethos of the business.

4. Using tools and priorities based on personal experience

"I selectively use the project management tools that I thought made sense and had value, like stakeholder mapping or a really good governance structure."

A key condition of success is the project manager or project director's use of their personal experience when selecting project approaches and techniques.

Project managers and directors find themselves in dynamic situations where following just one standardised approach makes little sense. A more tailored, flexible approach that addresses the characteristics of the specific situation is deemed more promising. Experience complements technique, guides one's actions and decisions and helps navigate through uncertain circumstances.

5. Speaking the language

"They probably don't even understand what you're speaking about, because you're using this funny language."

Project jargon can be alienating to some people, especially those who perceive they are having projects done to them. Sometimes it can cause partial project rejection, and at its worst, project failure.

As many of the people involved in delivering a project aren't comfortable with project management terminology, it's important to have a project manager who can talk using project management terms to some people but use a different more straightforward and reassuring language to others.

Use of language which is perceived to be 'too professional' in project management creates a barrier in a sector that focuses on reaching wide audiences through the use of plain English. While the sector does have its own

language such as ‘green lighting’ used to denote approval of a programme to move to production, there is little jargon in the sector compared to others.

Successful projects combine use of language appropriate for particular project audiences with an approach that is focused on people and is not too heavy on process.

b) What is professionalism?

“What I look for in a professional is somebody who has had the training, who has the toolbox and the skill set, but who knows then how to take that and pragmatically apply it, i.e. someone who has the track record.”

Although project management is referred to as a discipline, there is no consensus on the extent to which project management is seen as a profession in this sector. This may be due to its relatively recent introduction to this sector and a lack of agreement as to what a professional project manager looks like. While project management qualifications are often mentioned, more emphasis is put on experience as a key factor for success. Our findings reflect insights from other industries as well, where identifying professional behaviours and competencies that determine what the project practitioner does on a day-to-day basis is challenging.

It seems that in the broadcasting and media industries project management professionalism is still loosely defined in practice and reflects the dynamic nature of project work. When we talked to the research participants they needed time to frame their answers – an indication that professionalism is not a defined idea that is part of the development as a project manager. This however does not necessarily reflect the lack of professionalism in practice.

What was particularly impressive in their answers was an emphasis on designing and delivering projects that could have been described as ‘intelligent’, where an intelligent project would be diverse, dynamic and distinctive. A new TV programme, the relocation of complete businesses, the establishment of IT solutions or the coverage of major sporting events, were all projects that were carried out in a mind frame that, in combination, was:

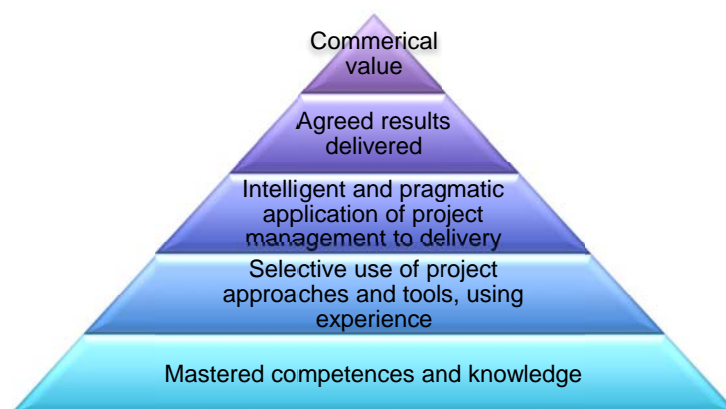
- Diverse – there was a strong focus on delivering projects that were tailored to the needs of the project stakeholders, including the public, the sponsor and others
- Dynamic – our participants were particularly aware of the multiple and evolving network of relationships within which their projects were embedded and developed. They knew that the delivery of the project relied on handling the extensive dynamics and change around and within the project
- Distinctive – we spoke to people who were committed to designing and delivering not only projects that would ‘sell’ and bring in a healthy revenue, or some form of operational efficiency, but to people who were committed to create work that is inspiring, impactful and leading.

Therefore, in this context and based on our insights from this study, our definition of professionalism would not only involve competence, quality, integrity and ethics, but also intelligence as the dominant approach to project management work in this industry.

This suggested a clear link between being a professional or delivering work professionally and delivering commercial value, as we illustrate below.

c) An intelligent, pragmatic approach and the link to commercial success

Commercial value can be defined as delivering a project to time, cost and quality while maintaining a strong customer and stakeholder focus on securing profit or some other commercial gain or benefit. In our study, participants adopted an intelligent, pragmatic approach to project management, and explicitly focused on the context of the project and the stakeholders involved, to deliver their projects to time, cost and quality.



Having mastered the basic competences and knowledge, successful project directors and managers selectively and intelligently use the project approaches and tools they think most useful for the project in hand. They do this by using their experience of the project environment, the stakeholders and how success has been defined.

We asked whether practitioners considered superior project management practices to be an add-on or an essential? These practices include:

- prioritising relationship management along with the more technical aspects of project delivery
- ensuring that key stakeholders are all involved in the development of the project on an on-going basis and
- going the extra mile to tailor the project's approach.

Were the project sponsor and key stakeholders willing to pay more for better project management or was basic project management sufficient?

Perhaps surprisingly, our participants did not make *any* such distinctions between these practices, seeing all of them to be essential. In the creative industries, pure technically-orientated, project management approaches are not the case, as creativity and impactful projects have been the order of the day.

In other words, this intelligent and pragmatic application of project management approaches delivers results and benefits which in turn help to deliver commercial value.

Summary

Our study showed that some of the key conditions for successful project delivery are to be clear about what is success right from the start, agree that internally and externally, and use suitable leadership styles. Successful projects also combine use of language appropriate for particular project audiences with an approach that is focused on people and is not too heavy on process.

Project management professionalism is still loosely defined in practice, reflects the dynamic nature of projects, and requires an intelligent approach to work. An intelligent and pragmatic, i.e. a professional approach to project management, delivers results and benefits which are more likely to help deliver commercial value.

About the Authors



Effie Konstantinou is the Course Director of the MSc in Strategic Management of Projects at University College London. She has studied the identity of the modern professional in more than seven industries and across sectors.



Ben Brownlee is a Programme Assurance Director at the BBC. He has been responsible for delivery and assurance of major projects in the private and public sectors.