

Foreword

‘There are three routes to failure: gambling, sex and technology. Of these the first is the quickest, the second the most pleasurable and technology the most certain’
- Attributed to French President Pompidou

The writing has been on the wall for major IT or IT-enabled projects for a decade or more; range of factors makes them highly risky. Amongst these factors, three stand out. The first is size, the second is how far strong project management disciplines are applied, and the third is the degree of technology maturity (Willcocks, Petherbridge, and Olson, 2003). Low technology maturity refers to a situation where a new technology is being applied, or an existing technology is being applied in a new way, or where the knowledge and experience of the technology amongst the developers and implementers is low. In itself, low technology maturity can disable a major project. But when all three factors come together, as they do in some of the examples in this book, they form a heady risk cocktail indeed.

This is only the start of the book. Risk factors can also come from the history of IT in the organization. For example, a history of failure can make stakeholders sceptical about their ability to develop and manage the technology, let alone utilize information and communication technologies for business value. Failure, or at the very least, disappointment, then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—as can be seen in several major initiatives in the UK National Health Service from the late 1980s. Serious risk can also come from the external context supplier incapability, a business merger derailing the value and speed of development, for example. More obvious have been a series of factors relating to the internal context including lack of senior management support, lack of user buy-in, poor internal project management capabilities, lack of a supportive structure or culture of change, to name but a few. Then

there are factors to do with the content and process of change. Therefore complex systems that have to be implemented across many business units with differing demands experience compound difficulties. Where a project touches many parts and users of an organization, the ability to manage the change process becomes an overriding critical success factor (Willcocks and Graeser, 2001).

There are many ways to deal with such issues, but, clearly, very detailed risk assessments followed by actions to mitigate the risks identified have to be at the forefront of management thinking. The question here is whether organizations are willing to broaden their risk assessments in order to take into account the new reality—the fact that large major IT projects these days are also business innovation projects and need to be managed as such. This brings into play more complex, intertwined risks, and the need to manage them through multiple actions and multiple stakeholders. Our own studies of major ERP and CRM projects find organizations and their IT suppliers experiencing serious difficulties with such a challenge, though we have also charted ways in which the more successful projects have been managed (Finnegan and Willcocks, 2007; Shanks, Seddon and Willcocks, 2003).

Clearly this book by Matthew Guah deals with a subject of great importance to contemporary economies and societies, to the point where, in the developed economies, one can say that no government agency or organization could avoid having to be knowledgeable about the issues this book deals with. Students of information systems will also find the book relevant to their studies, whether on undergraduate or postgraduate program. Having studied this area for some 20 years, and previous to that having been actively involved in many such projects for 10 years, I found the examples enlightening and the book highly topical. While there is still so much to learn about managing large-scale projects while the failure rate continues to change so little over so many years, and as such projects continue to be proposed, sponsored, and implemented, the need for a book such as this one will be recurring.

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