ABSTRACT

Repeated surveys, and most notably those by the Standish Group, suggest that a substantial proportion of Information Technology (IT) projects fail. The literature suggests that this is in part due to a lack of user involvement in the project. The authors' research describes the case study of a major IT system implementation project in East Africa. The paper reports on the results of both an online questionnaire and interviews with key participants. The authors' findings suggest that the subsequent failure of this project was in large part attributable to a lack of user involvement in the definition of requirements and implementation of the system. There did not appear to be an organisational culture that recognised the significance of such participation in the project. Although there are issues of definition raised, such as the definition of success and failure, this work supports previous findings that user involvement is a key factor in IT project success and failure.

Keywords: Information Technology (IT), IT Project Management in East Africa, Project Failure, Project Success, User Participation

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the implementation of a new IT system into a bank in East Africa. Over the years the bank had automated several operations based on individual user or departmental information. The systems that were being used were on several platforms that needed to be merged. The bank required an IT system to streamline its operations and also to reduce fraud that was rising as a result of increasing market activity. The project was managed by a project team including the project manager, who was also the head of IT in the bank, members from the board of directors, and some of the heads of department. The project involved the implementation of a Management Information System (MIS) that was to consolidate, streamline and automate all processes in the investment bank. The budgeted cost of the project was about $4,000,000 and this was for both hardware and software, exclusive of recurrent licenses. During the course of the project, costs increased to an estimated $5,350,000 partly due to the 20% yearly license fee later agreed with the supplier.

The project was estimated to take a period of six months to implement. However at the time it was stopped, it had been running for about one year. All budgetary allocations had been stopped by management. The hardware component of the project was about 85% implemented but the software component, the greater part of the whole project, was largely not implemented.

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The author worked as an ICT systems administrator representing the branch of her bank during the project. The researcher was particularly interested, from her experience, in the human factors that contributed to the failure of the project and thus approached key stakeholders with a view to participating in research which sought to establish the level of user involvement in the project, and the relationship between this and the project outcome. This personal involvement, and the significant role played by a few key stakeholders suggested qualitative research (discussed further in the section on methodology). Creswell’s widely cited work on qualitative research design (2007) suggests the case study as one of the five valid approaches for designing qualitative research. Thus the research examines the project as a case study in which we aim to answer three research questions:

1. What is the link between user involvement and IT project success?
2. How did the users describe their involvement in the project?
3. What issues were voiced or shared relating to how user involvement influences a project?

The paper thus commences with a discussion on the definition of project success and failure, which is a key concept in this paper and a contested field. It then discusses the role of users and user involvement in IT projects. It goes on to examine literature concerning the significance of users in IT projects, the benefits and costs of user involvement and more detailed issues such as how and when to involve users. The paper describes the case study and the organisation of a questionnaire and interviews to elicit the views of those who took part in the project. The paper presents the findings from this research and discusses the findings with conclusions including suggestions for future work.

LITERATURE

IT Project Success/Failure

The failure rate of IT projects has been an area of great concern from the earliest days of software engineering and has resulted in a significant body of research investigating the reasons for failure (Agarwal & Rathod, 2006; Standish Chaos report, 2009). The 2009 Standish Group Chaos report, for example, showed a decline in the number of successful IT projects to 32% with those that were “challenged” at 44% whilst the remaining 24% were considered as failed projects. This report explained that in 2009 compared to the previous years there was a decline in success rates. In fact the report stated that the results in 2009 indicated the “highest failure rates” in a long time (Standish Chaos report, 2009).

User involvement has been ranked as one of the top factors that determine project success or failure: for example in the 1995 report, user involvement was ranked highest as the most significant contributor of project success or failure. The 2000, 2001 and 2009 reports indicated user involvement as one of the key explanations as to why projects fail or succeed. “Lack of user involvement has been the number one contributor to project failure. Even when delivered on time and on budget a project can fail if it does not meet user needs or expectations” (Standish Chaos report, 2001).

Defining IT Project Success Such reports of course presuppose an agreed definition of project success. However, there is no common definition for success and failure (Thomas & Fernandez, 2008). Wang and Huang (2005) suggest there are different meanings attached to project success. For example, Thong et al (1996), define IT project success as the degree to which a particular project enables an organisation to meet its stated goals. He and King (2008) term IT project success as the way the system works in general in line with how efficient and useful it is, while De Wit (1988) argued that a project is generally a success when all technical specifications have been met and the different
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