

IT Projects: Practical, Pragmatic or Prestige?

The IT service in any organisation can be seen as two distinct areas: support (“fixing stuff”) and projects (“changing stuff”). The two are of course related and interlinked, but it tends to be the projects that get most management time and, importantly for a professional service firm, directly involve the partners in the decision making and supervision.

In my experience, projects fall into one of three types, and in this article I am going to give a brief overview of each type, and some things to look out for in each case.

Practical Projects

These are the behind the scenes projects usually run entirely by the IT department, and often only really understood by the IT department. These projects often expensive, and can be seen to deliver little value; the benefit is avoiding the large cost for not having done them.

Common mistakes: The underlying reason for practical projects is to provide extra capacity or performance. The most common problem is leaving them until the old systems are visibly failing, rather than replacing them before them. Sometimes this is due to poor capacity planning on the part of the IT management, but more usually it a result of senior management not approving the project as they can’t see a visible problem. Once they can, the project is by definition late, and IT support have to pick up the pieces in the mean time.

Success: No one notices that anything has happened. Main visible sign of success usually comes from the support team, whose life becomes easier.

Watch out for: Beware of practical projects that are really Prestige Projects in disguise (see below), with little business benefit but good fun/good CV points for the Head of IT.

Top Tip: Most practical projects involve replacing or upgrading old systems to cope with current and projected workloads. As these newer systems should be able to do more than the ones they replace, pass some of this on to end users as a visible improvement. For example grant a larger mailbox size as a result of an Exchange upgrade, or provide new reports and analysis from an HR or marketing system. Publicise these changes as being available and use this as an opportunity top explain the larger project that has been completed.

Pragmatic Projects

These are the best ones that deliver real value to the firm. They are typically small to medium sized, and have a clear and well understood business goal. Many of them will be focussed on a single department or business unit within the firm.

Projects might be simplifying the input of information into multiple systems for fee earners, or larger projects such as a system to computerise billing. Many of these projects will be

computerising a previously manual process, either with a whole new system or by extending the scope of an existing system.

If calculated (which it usually is not) these projects tend to show a very quick return on investment.

Common mistakes: Not doing them because they are not exciting. These projects are the quick wins that can be delivered on time and on budget, and result in happier users, but they are not often challenging or exciting for IT staff, and they do not carry the kind of cachet that raises the profile of partners involved.

A second mistake is bundling a number of related projects together to form a Prestige Project, at which point they cease to be Pragmatic and the likelihood of success is much smaller.

Success: Users happily working on your new system, and thinking that the time before they had it was part of the bad old days. (This often only takes a couple of weeks after a good project)

Watch out for: Project creep. As the project is simple and seems to be going well, there is a temptation to add more items into it before it goes live. This leads to delays, and often to not delivering the original goal.

Top Tip: Make sure you are always working on at least one of these projects. If all your projects are Practical or Prestige, users will spend a long time with no tangible improvements. Not only will this give them a (justifiably) poor view of IT, but the firm will fall behind in terms of using technology to improve working practices.

Prestige Projects

These are the large, high profile high budget projects that are going to change the firm. They typically have high partner level involvement, and a long time scale. They often involve new and trendy ideas. Most knowledge management over the past few years have been prestige projects, but these are now being tackled more as Pragmatic projects.

Prestige projects almost always deliver less than was hoped, and this is usually late and over budget (if one was set).

It is possible to create and run a successful prestige project. This requires careful management and a project team focussed on delivering the benefits outlined at the start.

There is a very fine difference between a Prestige Project and a large Pragmatic project. For example, changing a firm's Practice Management System (PMS) can fall into either category. It is a huge and expensive undertaking, but approached in the latter way will be as painless

as possible. Once personalities and egos become involved, it will be a Prestige Project destined to be painful and expensive.

Common mistakes: Too numerous to mention, but fundamentally creating them in the first place.

Not setting the business objective, but relying on delivering a 'vision'.

Project creep: As with pragmatic projects, but can be devastatingly worse.

Failing to set a budget (for both time and money) up front.

Success: Delivery of the system as agreed at the start. A good prestige project will generate publicity, and have natural support from the members of the firm once it has gone live, as they will see the benefits.

In reality, most Prestige Projects end up being classed as a success if they deliver something tangible, and don't involve the finance director writing off large amounts of money. This end point is usually reached by drastically cutting back the ambition to turn it back into a pragmatic project.

Watch out for: Projects designed to get nominated for awards.

Projects driven by suppliers, especially where the firm has a personal or client relationship that is being used as part of the justification. All projects should make sense in their own right.

Projects that involve creating in house something that can be bought in, even if the commercial solution seems very expensive (the in house one will cost more in the end).

Top Tip: Look carefully at your project. In most cases, it can be delivered as a series of clearly distinct Pragmatic Projects, in which case this is the way to go. These can be done under an overall umbrella brand ("Global System Update") but must be implemented as entirely free standing projects.

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