

Chapter 71

Feral Government?

The Limitations of Critical Success Factors in the Context of Major Government IT Projects

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ABSTRACT

Using workflow technologies as a metaphor for Critical Success Factors (CSFs), this chapter considers their use to improve the performance of major government IT projects, asking whether context can be ignored without repercussion or whether it is highly significant. Focusing on the UK, this exploration begins by defining “context,” then considering what it means in terms of government. A case study demonstrates that context limits the value of CSFs to a major government IT project. Whilst claiming to submit to the imposed workflow technology, the project team developed feral behaviour, manipulating the CSFs to match previous ways of working with no action being taken to ensure compliance. However, increased governance is not the answer. It would simply force these generic solutions on to unique problems; more contingent solutions should be sought to the problem of IT project failure in order to take these highly specific contexts into account.

INTRODUCTION: WORKFLOW TECHNOLOGIES AS A METAPHOR

Although not alone in suffering problems with its major IT projects, the UK Government is reckoned to lead the field in terms of cancelled or non-functioning projects (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow & Tinkler, 2004). In 2000, around 85% were considered to be in difficulty (Symonds, 2000); a decade later, the cost of failing projects

was estimated at around £26.3 billion (Savage, 2010). While these statistics may suggest complacency, the Government has, in fact, initiated a series of investigations and reports over the years, attempting to identify the ‘Critical Success Factors’ (CSFs) for these projects:

... those few things that must go well to ensure success for a manager or an organization (sic)... those managerial or enterprise areas that must

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be given special and continual attention to bring about high performance. (Boynton & Zmud, 1984, p.17). (Emphasis in the original.)

This chapter uses workflow technologies as a metaphor for CSFs with Feral Information Systems (FISs) providing a lens through which to view the behaviour of the teams managing IT projects in the government context. The term 'FIS' is used here to describe any technology that end users employ instead of the mandated system (Spierings, Kerr & Houghton, 2012). By looking at one thing through the traits of another, metaphors can highlight significant aspects that may not have been considered previously. Often used to study organisations, they encourage diverse thinking about the design and management of these complex, paradoxical phenomena (Morgan, 1986). This approach is used here as a means of shedding light on the failure of IT project management in government.

There is a danger of stretching metaphors in order to force a definition. However, in this instance, there are defensible points of comparison. The term 'workflow technology' normally describes software products, such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERPs) systems, but 'technology' can be used to describe any tools, not just software, that individuals use to carry out their tasks (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995); CSFs slot into this broader definition. Widely used in project management, they provide a means of organising work activity to improve performance. ERPs are Commercial-Off-The-Shelf (COTS) systems that deliver standardised ways of working, irrespective of context. Similarly, CSFs are a means of imposing standardised ways of working on government IT project management and are also used irrespective of context. This chapter considers whether context can truly be ignored in this way or whether there is danger in disregarding highly specific contexts and whether doing so results in imposed standardisation being subverted through the development of feral systems.

Along with the government reports mentioned above, a major research effort over the past fifty years or so has sought to identify a definitive list of best practice activities, 'those few things that must go well', in order to ensure the delivery of successful projects and, more recently, of successful IT projects. The outcome has been a plethora of advice, guidance, methodologies, standards and training, which might be expected to have percolated IT project management in the UK public sector to improve overall performance. However, there has been little attempt to examine how project teams respond to these CSFs, whether they do indeed give their '*special and continual attention*' to a few generic activities deemed by external bodies to be key to their particular project and whether that resulting attention then improves the outcome. Determining attitudes and behaviours is a difficult line of inquiry. The evidence relating to ERPs suggests that the imposition of CSFs is likely to be counter-productive, with workers rejecting the imposed ways of working to develop FISs that are considered more suited to their particular context (Kerr, Houghton & Burgess, 2007). Using the metaphor of workflow technologies and considering FISs will aid understanding of CSFs and whether their use is similarly counter-productive in terms of the management of IT projects in the government context.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to consider whether context can be ignored without repercussion or whether it is highly significant, limiting the value of workflow technologies, such as CSFs, and resulting in users developing FISs, which they consider to be of greater utility than the mandated systems in supporting their work. The discussion begins by defining 'context' before considering what it means in terms of government. A list of CSFs is identified, which stems from an influential government report into IT project failure and which has been tested for accuracy and completeness against a wider literature base. A case study of a major UK government IT project provides a means of assessing the understanding

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