

Chapter 112

Excellence in IT Project Management: Firing Agile Silver Bullets

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ABSTRACT

With almost thirty years since the start of our quest to find Fred Brooks' magical "Silver Bullet" to slay our productivity horrors, and twenty years since the first Standish report on IT project success and failures, are we getting closer? This paper discusses and challenges current thinking on process improvement initiatives to provide answers of how we can significantly improve IT project productivity and consider that to achieve a step change in improvement requires a different approach. Recent Standish research has highlighted the Agile Methodology as being particularly successful for the smaller IT project. However, what specifically is creating this improvement? Is it the process itself or is there something that the process enables? The hypothesis presented is that in order to create the step change improvement in IT project management delivery, we need to significantly improve the inter-personal skills of the whole IT project management team. The revolution for improved productivity will stem from challenging the typical career paths of technology learning to provide a much greater focus on the softer skills.

INTRODUCTION

Research into the reasons for project failures (Standish, 1994, 2001, 2014) continues to highlight the same areas or topics as the contributing factors. This research also indicates that we are not learning from the past as we repeat these failings. This paper questions whether we are really understanding the true root cause to our IT project failures and truly understanding our project successes. Often the correction of these failings identifies processes, methodologies or procedures for the answers – the ubiquitous Silver

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Bullet. It is presented in this paper that the concept of a Silver Bullet is flawed as it constrains our thinking. A more holistic approach is needed to get products and services to market quicker, better and cheaper.

The soft skills described within this paper are to support the goal of achieving personal excellence. The aspect of excellence builds on earlier work by the authors (Elliott et al, 2008 - 2015) and the agile theme was selected to convey the latest research finding of the Standish Group (Standish, 2014). Indeed, this recent Standish research is indicating that working closely in teams is a key factor for success. Project management can be articulated as getting things done through people, so skilful management of team dynamics and effective communications based on an appreciation and understanding of people's behaviours will significantly improve working relationships to create an environment for success.

The paper utilises some useful and well-known recent articles to convey both historical and current themes on productivity and quality improvement messages. It extends current thinking and research that a more holistic approach is needed to put in place significant improvements in these areas.

Indeed, it is presented that the less considered, so called "soft skills", are more effective than the more traditional process methodologies.

A literature review provides historical and current views of the development of process and quality systems that have been utilised for improvement initiatives. Some have proved successful and others not. The review highlights the need for a different thinking in our understanding of what is required to achieve success. It provides the background to the phrase the "silver bullet" and discusses its impact, both negative and positive on the quest to find our quality and productivity improvements.

This paper sets out to prove that the identification that soft skills are an un-tapped commodity in the quest for improvements. Detailed research on project successes and failures are outlined to highlight the need to identify through root cause analysis, the underlying soft skills improvements needed to consistently achieve project success. A similar approach is presented in discussing the benefits of the Agile Methodology. In particular, how the published Agile Manifesto provides a focus on the people aspects of the application of the process and its success. A path to how we can improve soft skills is proposed within a framework of emotional intelligence which research demonstrates is a key factor for success. The conclusions from this paper are used as a basis for recommended improvements to training and people development schemes and to provide practical examples of how they can be achieved.

Literature Review

Quality and process standards are developed from known best practices, i.e. activities, methods and tools that have proved to be successful in delivering IT projects. This approach has been captured well, in the case study undertaken at IBM by Radice et al (1985) as a programming process study. Humphrey (1989) describes how this is a significant development in the world of software quality management standards as the maturity model formed the basis of the Software Engineering Institute's, Capability Maturity Model (SEI CMM) some years later.

The well-known standards, the ISO 9001 standard (ISO, 2000) and the Software Engineering Institute's (SEI) Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI) (Carnegie Mellon, 2001), provide some correlation on the priority aspects of process management, but there are also some differences. ISO 9001 highlights eight principles for a successful management system: customer focus, leadership, involvement of people, process approach, system approach to management, continual improvement, factual approach to decision making and mutually beneficial supplier relationships, whereas, SEI CMMI conveys the initial key process areas of configuration management, quality assurance, sub-contract management, project

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