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# Managing IT Projects for Success: Reengineering or Better Project Management?

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## PANEL 13

### MANAGING IT PROJECTS FOR SUCCESS: REENGINEERING OR BETTER PROJECT MANAGEMENT?

**Panel Chair:** Mark Keil, Georgia State University

**Panelists:** Gopal K. Kapur, Center for Project Management  
M. Lynne Markus, Claremont Graduate School  
James A. Willbern, The Willbern Group

IT projects can fail for any number of reasons and in some cases can result in considerable financial losses for the organizations that undertake them. The strategic importance that IT now plays coupled with the burgeoning costs of developing information systems has raised the stakes associated with project failure. While it is difficult to obtain statistics on the actual frequency of information systems failures, various sources suggest that at least half of all IS projects are not as successful as one would like them to be (Gladden 1982; Lyytinen and Hirschheim 1987). Numerous articles in the popular press seem to provide anecdotal evidence of this (Betts 1992; Kindel 1992; McPartlin 1992; Mehler 1991; Rothfeder 1988). The relatively high prevalence of failures in this field suggests the need to reexamine the way in which projects are managed.

Traditional wisdom holds that many IT failures result from poor project planning and control. Explanations that have been offered include inadequate cost estimation models (Brooks 1975; Kemerer 1987) and failure to manage the risks associated with IS projects (Alter 1980; Ginzberg 1981; McFarlan 1981). More recently, some researchers have suggested the need to look beyond the traditional explanations in explaining the problem and in formulating alternative solutions (Abdel-Hamid and Madnick 1989; Keil and Mixon 1994; Markus and Keil 1994).

This panel will explore a wide range of opinions concerning the underlying causes of what is often labeled "poor project management." The objective will be to raise these issues in a public forum and to discuss the type of research agenda that is needed to produce new knowledge that would be beneficial to both researchers and practitioners. Members of the panel will address the following questions:

- Is the failure problem a serious one? What role does project management really play (is it a symptom or a cause of failure)?
- Are IT projects more difficult to manage than other types of projects? If so, why?
- Are better project management tools the answer or do we need to radically reengineer the development process itself?
- Is the current research on software project management useful to practitioners? If not, what kind of research is needed in this area?

#### Panel Discussion Format

The panel chair will begin the session with a short introduction laying out the key issues relating to IT failure and the traditional case that has been made for better project management. This introduction will set the stage and serve as motivation for the panel discussion. Each panelist will then be given ten minutes to present a position. After each panelist has presented, the other panelists will be given a brief opportunity to respond if they wish. After all panelists have presented, the audience will be invited to ask questions and to join in the discussion.

## Positions Taken by the Panelists

Jim Willbern, Director of The Willbern Group, an international consulting firm that specializes in runaway systems management, will present a view from the trenches. He will present evidence from his consulting practice indicating that IT project failures are indeed a common occurrence. Willbern will contend that many IT failures are the result of poor project management. He will then argue that IT projects are no different from any other type of project and that traditional approaches to project management apply equally well in an IT context. Willbern will further argue that academic research in the area of IT failure and software project management offers little in the way of practical information that would help firms to improve the management of IT projects and to avoid such failure.

Gopal Kapur, President of the Center for Project Management, will contend that software project management is a serious problem but that traditional approaches to project management are often unsatisfactory for managing IT projects. He will argue that many of the problems associated with systems development stem from complex dynamics of software project management that are not well understood and that software projects are fundamentally different from other types of projects. He will then argue that better models and improved training are the answer to improved software project management.

Lynne Markus, Associate Professor of Information Science at The Claremont Graduate School, will claim that project management is not the major problem in most system failures. She will contend that non-use (i.e., building systems that are technically correct but are never used) is the key issue that must be addressed in managing the software development process. She will argue that, in order to get real productivity improvements from our IT investment, we must totally reengineer the systems analysis and design process.

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