12-12-2020

Panel: COVID-19 Challenges to Project Management

Michael Seals

J. D. Pareek

Martin Taylor

Mary Sumner

Panel: COVID-19 Challenges to Project Management

Submitted to: 15th International Research Workshop on IT Project Management (IRWITPM)

December 12, 2020

Sponsored by: SIGITPROJMGMT

Brief description: COVID-19 has presented many new challenges and new opportunities for project management professionals and IT leaders. This panel will address these challenges and identify project management best practices and processes which have been effective in meeting these challenges. The panelists will share specific instances and challenges explaining how Project Cost Management, Time Management, Risk Management, Human Resources Management, and Risk Management have enabled them to manage during the pandemic and as a part of "return-to-work" scenarios. Hearing from these leaders as they accomplish digital transformations for their businesses and organizations will be an opportunity to bridge the gap between research and practice and to establish a dialogue between academic leaders and IT industry leaders which will provide many new questions to come.

Panelists' Names and Brief Biographical Sketches:

- Michael Seals, Vice President of Information Technology, Hussman Corporation.
- J.D. Pareek, Vice President of Information Technology, Nidec-Motor Corporation.
- Martin Taylor, Chief Information Officer, Arco Construction.
- Mary Sumner, Professor of CMIS and Managing Director and CIO of SumnerOne.

Background and Context: The COVID-19 Environment

The COVID-19 environment has presented unprecedented changes and challenges to society and to the economy. By August 31, 2020, 25,000,000 COVID-19 cases were reported worldwide, with 6,000,000 cases in the United States. GNP reduction has been forecasted between 35 and 40%. Industries have declined (airlines, lodging, travel) while other industries have expanded (home improvement, amazon.com, video-streaming, on-line grocers, and food delivery).

Without question, Digital is the New Normal.   Neflix, with 182.8 million users, added 16 million new users in 2020. Zoom has 12.9 million users. Social events, professional meetings, conferences, and Career Fairs are now "virtual," as are most college and university classes. Digital health solutions and digital content solutions are growing precipitously.

The *New York Times* provides daily Coronavirus Briefings. In their September 3, 2020 coronavirus briefing, here are some statistics:

- More than 833,000 U.S. workers filed for unemployment last week.

- A New York Times survey of 1500 colleges and universities has revealed at least 51,000 cases at 1,020+ colleges, and at least 60 deaths since the coronavirus began.
- More than 100 colleges have reported at least 100 cases, with spikes in recent weeks.

Project Management and COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for project management.   In many organizations, 95% of the workforce is remote. Everyone is working from home. The digital transformation associated with providing an IT infrastructure and connectivity to enable remote work has been and continues to be a significant challenge to IT leaders and to IT professionals, but the project management challenges go beyond IT and IT support.   The experiences, challenges, opportunities, and best practices were shared as part of several CIO Roundtables addressing COVID-19 during July and August 2020. The following scripts, based upon talking points and perceptions shared at the CIO Roundtables, provide some insight into the challenges and opportunities-met through project management.

Project Cost Management

COVID-19 has impacted business significantly. Many companies are projecting a 30 - 50% revenue "kill" this year. General and administrative costs have been cut by 20 - 30%. Overhead reduction is the norm. In terms of people, firms have deployed furloughs, salary reductions, and reduced hours. Discretionary spending has ended and capital projects are on-hold. Cost cutting is a necessity, on account of the anticipated business downturn. Revenue is down because retailers and distributors are shutting down, and businesses are going on-line.

Project Risk Management

COVID-19 presents risks to individuals, organizations and to the society. Risk exposure is a day-to-day decision by business leaders, customers, and families.   Decisions and choices are based upon risk and uncertainty.   Fly or drive? Attend a class in-person or virtually? Work-from-home (WFH) or at the office?

In the business context, risks abound and risks must be assessed, controlled, and mitigated. Work-from-home (WFH) creates risks from un-trusted home networks. In the WFH era, hackers know that security precautions are not-in-place and there is a huge increase in hacking and spear-fishing. There is a renewed focus on business continuity planning and cloud backup systems to manage and to mitigate the risks of lost data.

Businesses are addressing fundamental questions of livelihood. Business leaders are watching cash flow "like a hawk" and focusing on analytics: accounts receivable, labor utilization, revenue projections and forecasts in an effort to manage revenue, cost and overhead to stay afloat. Business data analytics is more important than ever before.

Project Communications Management

The majority of people are working remotely and communicating remotely via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex, and platforms like Amazon Connect. Because of WFH, office phones are rolling over to cell phones. Zoom has become a learning platform for most colleges and universities, along with K-12. Office buildings are vacant. The new normal presents new communications challenges and venues such as daily-check-in's, company happy hours, and virtual training workshops. Each firm is orchestrating these communications and collaboration platforms as a foundation for doing business.

Project Human Resources Management

The COVID-19 pandemic has had vast implications for Human Resources. It looks like the picture is "doing more with less." Sourcing people (freelancers, contractors), as we need them, is the norm. People are working 16 hour days. In one company, the IT leader said, "there is a 90% chance that we will not be going back to the office." Alternative work schedules, hybrid schedules, rotations, and newly-forming collaborations with partners and contractors are emerging. The gig-economy features gig-workers who migrate to opportunities as needed. The talent marketplace is not limited to place, location and time. Organizations now have access to a world-wide talent pool and virtual workers.

Creating an engaging culture and connectivity to people is a potential challenge. Organizations are striving to be sensitive to their people: to show people that we really care.

Project Procurement Management

Project Procurement Management is center-stage to COVID-19.   COVID-19 has necessitated a focus on supplier management: cancelling IT contracts for outsourcing of services, re-negotiating contracts, and putting project on-hold. IT has had to cut costs, even with an increased workload. Organizations on the roundtable were trying to go the extra mile on workstations, servers, phones......not buying new equipment.

Several IT cost reduction/optimization strategies are achieving hard-dollar savings by migration to Cloud Services, moving backup to the cloud, moving from phones to Microsoft TEAMS, deploying soft phones, and moving to web-based communications and conferencing systems like Zoom and TEAMS for staff and workgroups. There is an increased emphasis on automating processes, including accounting and purchasing.

Summary and Implications:

This Project Management Panel will bring to light the challenges of COVID-19 and how project management best practices and project management leadership have helped to manage risk, mitigate risk and address the challenges of the "new normal" as a result of COVID-19.

Appendix: **Questions for the IT Leadership Roundtables.**

1. What are the major challenges you have faced in leading IT in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis situation?
2. Has IT taken on specific COVID-19 remote work projects (VPN, two-factor authentication, secure technology in remote offices?)
3. What Project Scope, Time, and Cost Management practices have you deployed in facing the migration to a remote workforce? (deploying "work from home" (WFH) technology?)
4. What Project Risk Management challenges have you faced and how have you mitigated these risks (WFH risks: secure network access; duplicative technology; use of personal workstations; file-sharing).
5. Have any projects been put on the back-burner, put on-hold, or cancelled during COVID-19? What are these projects?
6. Have any projects moved to top-priority during COVID-19?
7. Can you identify a project which has posed unique challenges to you and to your team during COVID-19?
8. What Communications Management technology platforms (Microsoft Teams, Zoom conferencing) have you deployed to enable and facilitate meetings and communications with employees, customers, suppliers and other key stakeholders?
9. What Human Resources challenges have you faced during COVID-19? Has the downsizing of staff affected your IT workload in a negative way? Have you been faced with increased demand for IT support and downsizing of staff at the same time, that is: have you had to do more with less?
10. In terms of Project Procurement Management, have you reduced the IT expense during COVID-19? Have you cancelled or re-negotiated agreements, outsourcing contracts, and software licenses?
11. In terms of Risk Management, has there been a renewed focus on business continuity plans?
12. What enhanced cybersecurity tools, technologies, and processes have you put into place to safeguard the security and authenticity of remote workers?
13. Has IT taken on specific COVID response or "return-to-work" projects? (thermal imaging cameras for screening?
14. Do you see and envision opportunities for IT to lead the way because of the critical role on IT leadership in managing the challenges of COVID-19?
15. Were you well-prepared for this crisis? Or, in 20/20 hindsight, would you have prepared more effectively?