HOW TO KILL A PROJECT BEFORE IT KILLS YOU, AND SURVIVE TO TELL IT

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Abstract

What happens when a project is raised out of very good reasons and intentions, but the timeline puts it in the midst of other major efforts that would come at the same time?

Are you as a project manager obliged to just run the project as directed? or Do you have the obligation to stop it if you see the risks to be high? Or at least, Do you have the obligation to bring up the risks and let others decide?

What exactly is your obligation and how do you carry it out?

We will present a real case of one such project, one that had very good reasons to run and could provide great benefit, it had a deadline to complete (still several months away at the time of the discussions) and given other efforts and projects in the portfolio, it could have resulted in a major body of work at a very high risk that could derail not only this project but the others in the portfolio for the year.

We will present and describe details of the problem project and surrounding context (what other projects and events were in the horizon), how this project was getting coordinated and worked, and the reasons why it was believed to be creating high risks.

We will then describe what actions were taken to best determine if risks were really present, provide quantitative and qualitative data and raise awareness, and ultimately the specific action/s used to help define recommend a direction and a decision to continue or not, and the alternatives provided.

Key words: *Project management, project risk, project portfolio, manager duties, manager responsibility, corporate culture*
JEL code: *M150, M140*

Introduction

This paper describes a practical and real life case. It is however anchored in the PMBoK methodology and practical project management practice best practices as well as taking into account the cultural and financial aspects of the organization various stakeholders across various countries and continents.

The case involves a project started to migrate from a data centre into another from the same provider, which was initiated with considerable delay and which at a later point was used to "piggyback" a much larger project to consolidate data centres.

Many of the assumptions initially taken were proven to be incorrect and/or in conflict with the deadlines and timelines in discussion. A major issue was that the lack of consideration of the portfolio of projects and other potential events for the following months and year.

In the opinion of the enterprise architect, the risk of such a project (the consolidation of data centres) was too large to undertake and thus he communicated same to the hub CIO for further discussion and to raise it to a higher level.

Documentation as to the risks and costs, as well as a more sensible alternative were prepared and presented and ultimately, the consolidation project was hold for another time and only the original data centre migration was approved.

Some projects look great in paper, and a more formalized analysis with factual data can result in an entire different outlook.

This paper attempts to describe the dilemma of a PM as to whether he/she blindly runs a project or brings up the risks to stop it before it causes harm to the organization carrying it. With a smaller project, the PM would have a lower level of difficulty in steering to the right direction, the high stakes and visibility on the project we are presenting defines a different dynamic altogether.

We will present and discuss such a case inclusive to the details surrounding the state of affairs within the organization and considerations leading to the decision to hold.

Discussion

How it all started

The original requirement was a data centre migration because the host provider was closing it for becoming obsolete to the needs of a modern data centre, as it was not economically feasible to remodel or retrofit and thus, it communicated to us about 1 year in advance of the closing date in Q3 2016, to migrate all systems footprint to another centre owned by them in a different location.

Host provider offered assistance in the migration in the form of resources, planning, and in some of the costs for the project execution.

New hosts will be stand up where we would move the applications and workloads, which will provide compliance with vulnerabilities as well as consolidation and rationalization of servers and applications. It was known from the very beginning that while much of the new data centre infrastructure would be build, a sizable number of hosts would have to be 'lift and ship', which adds logistical challenges.

The closing data centre had a deadline to close and we needed to be completely out of it and up and running in the new data centre at that date.

It is important to note that while the initial communication from data centre host provider was given in Q3 2015, for a closure at end of Q3 2016, no activities were actually done until beginning of Q1 2016; that is, no progress had been made until 9 months before the closure of the old data centre.

In fact, there was no formal project in place nor a project manager assigned/designated; we will see in the next section how an actual project and its scope was only shaping. In this context, while it was clear what responsibilities were at play according to the PMBoK Guide (PMI 2013), it does not provide a specific guidance to help project managers who are involved or related to a situation compromising a project let alone one that is not yet even a project.

The author's role in the organization is of chief architect, however, he holds a PMP certification and as such is also bound by the PM responsibilities to influence the best outcome for the organization. See responsibilities and skills from PMBoK Guide (PMI 2013), Fig1 and Fig 2 below.

1.7.1 Responsibilities and Competencies of the Project Manager

In general, project managers have the responsibility to satisfy the needs: task needs, team needs, and individual needs. As project management is a critical strategic discipline, the project manager becomes the link between the strategy and the team. Projects are essential to the growth and survival of organizations. Projects create value in the form of improved business processes, are indispensable in the development of new products and services, and make it easier for companies to respond to changes in the environment, competition, and the marketplace. The project manager's role therefore becomes increasingly strategic. However, understanding and applying the knowledge, tools, and techniques that are recognized as good practice are not sufficient for effective project management. In addition to any area-specific skills and general management proficiencies required for the project, effective project management requires that the project manager possess the following competencies:

- **Knowledge**—Refers to what the project manager knows about project management.
- **Performance**—Refers to what the project manager is able to do or accomplish while applying his or her project management knowledge.
- **Personal**—Refers to how the project manager behaves when performing the project or related activity. Personal effectiveness encompasses attitudes, core personality characteristics, and leadership, which provides the ability to guide the project team while achieving project objectives and balancing the project constraints.

Figure 1. **Responsibilities of the Project Manager**
Source: PMBoK Guide (PMI 2013)

1.7.2 Interpersonal Skills of a Project Manager

Project managers accomplish work through the project team and other stakeholders. Effective project managers require a balance of technical, interpersonal, and conceptual skills that help them analyze situations and interact appropriately. Appendix X3 on Interpersonal Skills describes important interpersonal skills, such as:

- Leadership,
- Team building,
- Motivation,
- Communication,
- Influencing,
- Decision making,
- Political and cultural awareness,
- Negotiation,
- Trust building,
- Conflict management, and
- Coaching.

Figure 2. **Skills of the Project Manager**
Source: PMBoK Guide (PMI 2013)

The change of scope (piggyback)

As noted before, only in Q1 of 2016 discussions for a project had started in earnest and one of the main points was to not only execute the data centre migration but instead to do a data centre consolidation from the various data centres managed by the provider into a single one (possibly one where the migration was targeting, but undefined at that point), all by end of Q3 2016, 9 months away!

Initial estimates indicated that should we do a consolidation, the complexity and level of effort would be at least doubled, and additional work was done to fine tune the estimates as well as to define costs and risks.

It is important to note that while the target data centre existed it had not yet been designated production ready; networking (both internal and external as well as building of hosts/VMs had to be done, and in some cases, some infrastructure could not be built and hence had to be moved ('pick and ship').

There was another event announced at same time: the company had initiated an acquisition of a large competitor and it was expected to be completed about July of 2016, with initial integrated operations required at end of Q3 2016 as well.

In the meantime, time was running, and by beginning of Feb 2016, no specific direction had been defined while we were now 8 months to the deadline.

Important to note that at this point in time, there is no formal project yet in place, meaning no specific requirements or activities; the only sure fact was that the deadline of Q3 2016 had not and will not move.

The acquisition and all other projects in the portfolio for the year of course would continue, a few of those projects are shown below in Figure 3 below.
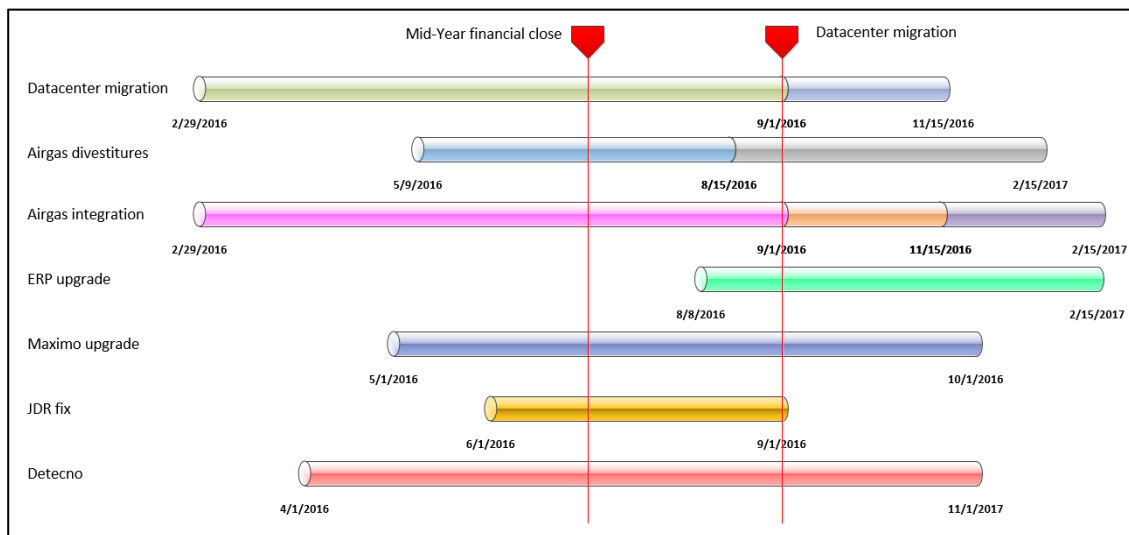

Figure 3. **Largest (complexity/scope) projects for 2016**

Complexities and risks

From the above section, it is undisputable that the project landscape was complex and that the risks of undertaking the broader scope of the data centre migration were high given the short time left for plan and implement such a project.

Some other important aspects were also undefined:

Licensing required for the products in the new target data centre. This is important because how a given cost of licenses is defined is in great measure based on the actual servers being used, as well as several other aspects that are commercially defined in contracts and agreements.

Thus, it was very critical to define what those licenses costs would be in the new setting.

Potential opportunities for widespread rationalization of systems as well as decommissioning of others. In our case, a best scenario is to migrate only what will remain operational, and defining systems that were "duplicates".

Vulnerabilities assessment and remediation. This aspect was related to a number of systems operating in foundational blocks (OS, DB, etc) that were no longer supported (or ending support soon) and the opportunity to upgrade those, which implied the need to also upgrade/update the system running on top of them, which in turn implied the requirement of testing. A migration without this consideration would also migrate the risks of vulnerabilities and would become a more pressing requirement as soon as the date centre migration was completed.

Several other technical aspects that presented the opportunity to be resolved in this migration rather the perpetuate them and postponing the resolution for another time. However, many of these aspects also created added complexities.

Given that there was no formal decision nor a contract was ready, and in reality no procurement of basic infrastructure had been initiated, it was imperative to define a direction one way or another.

For example, internal network build and external communications had not been started, and many of those require 60 or even 90 days lead time just to be installed, with additional time for testing and certification (which is required to designate a data centre to be "Production ready".

The other projects had an already established plan, and some were already in the initial stages. Most important, the acquisition was in progress, and this process has a great level of governmental and regulatory oversee, thus much effort was provided to comply with government requirements, without having a firm date on whether the acquisition would be approved (or not).

Many if not all of the other projects could not be hold or moved and it was imperative that resources to implement those became available out of the data centre migration.

It became very important at the time to define with detail an estimate of effort in hours, costs, as well as the associated risks, even before a decision is made.

Stance to kill the broader scope

After several internal calls and meetings at the local level, the informal direction of the local office was to not do the data centre consolidation. That seem to be the logical and common sense position, however, as noted above, a formal analysis was needed and the chief architect was charged to do one, with the agreement that it would have to be done very soon and be as precise as possible.

It was already almost the middle of February 2016 and it was agreed to have this ready no later than February 15-16 to be presented to the global leadership for a decision by month end at latest.

The author then worked for 2 days preparing a detail analysis in support of a summary position and recommendation.
The analysis had two cases to compare and contrast:
1. Migration by Q3 2016 followed by consolidation in a non-specified time
2. Consolidation and migration done together

The analysis determined that taking the direction of the case 2 over case 1 signified about 9,000 to 10,000 additional hours or 2-3 times higher level of effort (on the basic activities, with

possibly 4-5 times once all details are accounted for, including some expected overruns), while implementing case 1 was only a marginal effort of 20-25% (with a base of 5,000-5,500 hours) over the consolidation and thus the recommendation was to work the project a "two-step" process in which the migration would be the first step and a second step later for the consolidation

Additionally, the risk in having to fit a consolidation project in a tight and non-movable deadline as oppose to a much smaller effort of migration, which still tight but relatively smaller was an important consideration.

The case for migration only would attempt to correct some of the vulnerabilities, but not the rationalization. As well, there was no need to determine the licensing required.

Finally, given personnel and other resources already in plans (which included that a consolidation would not have the provider support if the target data centre was not theirs), many of the constraints around testing and coverage for the other projects fell in place.

Now, with the analysis ready, the next and most important step was to communicate appropriately to the various stakeholders and decision makers.

In Fitzgerald 2010, we see that early communication has a very important role when there is a "sick" project, more so in the effort to hold or kill the project, rather than go with the flow until it is later 'discover' that failure is imminent:

> But whenever projects stumble or even die, and people feel wounded, it usually has something to do with that most persistent of people problems: communication.
> Michael Krigsman, CEO of Asuret Inc., an IT project management consultancy in Brookline, Mass., sketches out a typical chain of miscommunication that often plagues problem IT projects:
> **Team to project manager:** "Have you seen this deadline? We couldn't finish if we worked without sleep from now until then."
> **Project manager to CIO:** "The project has some, um, issues. We're, uh, going to need more time."
> **CIO (wagging finger):** "Make it work."
> **CIO to business side:** "I've spoken to the project manager, and the team knows they have to get it done."
> "The implication is, 'If you don't make it work, we'll fire your sorry ass,' " says Krigsman. Once a top manager refuses to budge on a deadline, a series of Dilbert moments typically follow, as IT people carry on as though nothing is wrong until the project's impending failure becomes impossible to ignore.

We see a similar advice in Shacklett 2014, as number 1 recommendation

> For any project, it is important to set the stage for open and cooperative communications up front — and then to practice open communications. When you see a project that is going to fail, having open communications channels is an absolute necessity.

In our case, being a global company, with a project governance in place and with a very interweaved matrix functional structure, it would require a lot of finely tuned communication to the various levels of that structure.

This is the most difficult place to be: to stand against a project that the top leadership wants but without the visibility to the lower level details of the complexities and risks associated, and which the local leadership (Americas zone) is rejecting given those much higher complexities, costs and risks.

Thus, the first step was to daft and deliver to the global leadership the analysis noted above. This was followed a couple of days with the more comprehensive detail of the analysis and requesting a conference call to discuss all the details as well as to handle any questions that might come up.

While the call was going to be among the global and top local leadership; in the meantime, separate meeting with other levels of the local leadership too place to inform and bring up to speed of the events of the project and ensure everyone was ready in case of additional information and/or analysis was required

In parallel, call with global teams at the head office were also setup to ensure the flow of communication and to understand whether there were any other tracks of work that were interdependent to the project to be discussed, and if so, what could be potential impacts.

Ultimately, the objective was to present a stance reflecting on the rejection of the piggyback project, while providing factual solid information on the costs, risks and complexities present and to clearly communicate this in the level adequate to the specific audiences in each case.

While the brief summary of all the plans to communicate, inform, coordinate and cover any potential impacts could seem trivial, it needs to be highlighted that this required a great deal of 'finesse' in ensuring the right teams and leaders were brought up to the situation within the correct context and timing, not to mention that the correct context and timing is at least partially dependent upon cultural context (of the countries, cultures involved).

It is not the intention to offer pointers on cross cultural aspects of project communications, but suffice to say that being a global French company, its headquarters and global leadership is based in Paris; while the corporate office for all the Americas is based in Houston, USA; with English as the official corporate language.

Conclusions

Communication, clear, transparent and timely is the most important tool to manage a project or initiative that has risks.

More so the higher the risks.

Whenever risks are detected in a project, it is always the best direction to alert the project sponsor as soon as the risks become apparent. Follow up to other stakeholders is the next step.

Many times, it will not be a popular move to raise your voice (and maybe the only one) in those situations; you might not have that much time to ring the bell; and waiting for things to settle might lead to miss the opportunity to contain the damage.

It is not a matter of raising issues every time or at the slightest tremor. If in doubt, the project sponsor must be your first stop.

You must be ready to escalate and go higher up the ladder and bring up your concerns.

Before starting the alarms, compile information and data which would be representative of the concerns you have, as well, you must have a good idea of the points to consider in considering the steps forward. Depending on your specific role and rank within the organization, you might not have full visibility of all aspects, but you should be ready to provide details of your data and how this leads to the risks and concerns you have voiced.

Your analysis needs to focus on quantifiable factors and center on cost, time and risk. Is best to associate risk cost and time and not just probabilities (which could be subjective).

It might be the case that you will have to defend your position, and thus, your costs, time and risks analysis will be of the utmost importance, rather than subjective positions. It is possible that you might even have to defend your position to the top levels of the organization.

It is also very important that not only you present the problems with a given course of action, but alternatives and paths to follow. We mean valid, feasible and sound alternatives, and with factual data and information to back them up.

Alternatives and paths might include compromises, be sure to clearly communicate those.

The objective of communicating and presenting the problems, facts and alternatives is to reach a win-win situation, keep in mind that most times, the situation at hand is not a zero-sum game; but ultimately, it could be and if so, you then need to be ready for it.

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