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Successful Project Managers Listen Then Act.

By John Cornish, CEO at Micro Planning International Ltd



Reflecting on my experience in project management confirms the essential need to actively listen to everyone involved in and affected by a project - whatever its size or importance. Engaging with people begins at the start of a project and continues through to the final milestone.

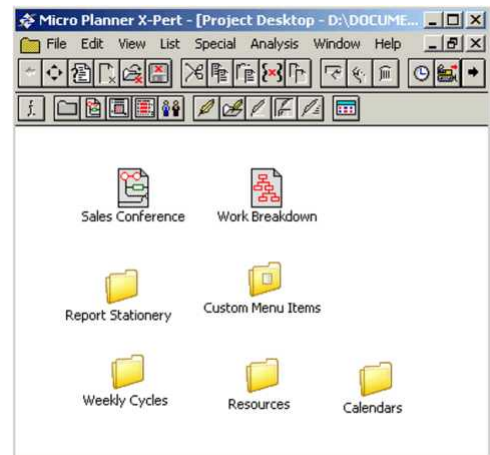
The following paragraphs explain more and if these ideals are adopted will lead project managers to be more successful for their clients, their company and their careers.

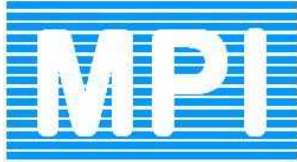
What is a Project?

“A project is a unique plan with a start and finish that will deliver a desired outcome that will benefit the sponsor.”

Using that definition, we can tease out some project issues:

- It has never been done before and therefore it is not an ongoing, repetitive, operation
- because it is new and there will be risks
- the people involved will form a temporary project team and then disband
- the processes used in general management (of operations and people) are not suitable for managing projects nor the people working in them
- the project will have a defined deliverable product, or outcome, that has a benefit that will have value to the project's sponsor





- the success of the project will be measured against the approved business case and the Sponsor will need a return on his investment.

The professional project manager soon recognises that his role is more than simply task planning and resource scheduling. It's all about managing innovation, managing temporary teams, delivering anticipated benefits, managing risks and communicating with a set of people who work in the project or are affected by the project. And those people continuously change and hence the need for ongoing communications.

Another aspect of projects is that they fall into two main categories "Hard, or Soft Projects". Let's explore these.

Is Your Project Hard or Soft?

Designing and constructing buildings, roads, plant and equipment are classic "hard" projects. Similarly, the design of a major power station can be described as a "hard" project, the outcomes being drawings and specifications. These deliverables are tangible and measurable.

By way of contrast, the outcome of a project to introduce commercialisation into a public sector organisation is not tangible; this is a typical "soft" project. Software development projects are an interesting blend of "soft" and "hard", in many respects the final outcome is "hard", (i.e. operating software with defined functionality) but much of the development is closer to "soft" projects as the technology and process definitions evolve.

Here are some characteristics that I use to explain the difference between hard and soft projects.

Hard projects:

- have a clear definition with all key elements (time, quality and cost) under the control of the Project Manager
- have time schedules that are often critical to success and profitability and the objectives are usually set at the beginning





- consist of physical or material elements where drawings, specifications, quality and acceptance testing are well established and the requirements and technology involved are stable and understood.

Soft Projects:

- have objectives that may not have a firm definition at the out-start and not all the factors will be under the control of the project team
- have very broad parameters for success (i.e. not financial) and interim reviews and significant changes in strategy are common
- may depend on their success from ‘invisible’ components associated with changing attitudes and ways of doing things
- are carried out in a context that will evolve during the project and needs the ability to adapt to changes in many areas such as political, economic, social, technological, environmental or legal changes.



I've laboured on a bit in order to flesh out the issues of good project management and the real challenges that each unique project brings. The project manager cannot be an expert and know everything about each industry, market, culture, etc., so he needs to get ideas from the people both working within the project and from those affected by the project.

So now let's agree on the need to involve people and hear their views, ideas and gain an understanding of their feelings towards the project's outcomes and its perceived benefits. And most importantly gain their desire for a successful project. But when in the project's life cycle should these conversations and "harvesting of ideas" occur?

Project Life Cycle

Let's look first at the four phases that are part of the project's life cycle and when the dialogue with people should occur.

Project Life Cycle			
Conceptual Phase	Definition Phase	Implementation Phase	Hand-Over & Close Out Phase
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need, or opportunity is confirmed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred solution is evaluated and optimised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Management Plan is executed, monitored and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project deliverables are handed over to the Sponsor and set



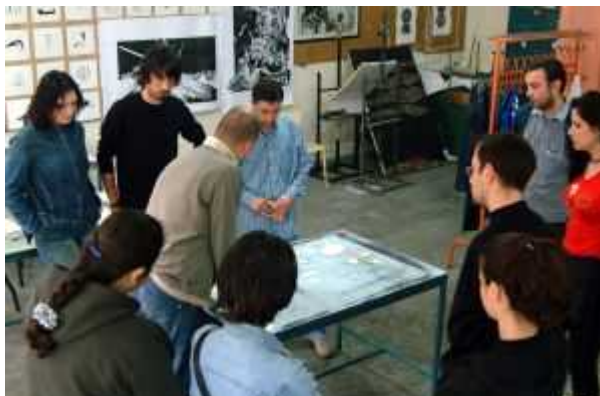
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feasibility is considered • Preferred solution is identified • Business case is produced • Risk Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project definition and scope, time, cost, quality are agreed • Project Management Plan agreed • Project resources identified 	<p>controlled</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design is finalise and used to build the deliverables 	<p>to work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The benefits of the project are realised • Final project reviews and reflective learning takes place for future projects.
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Hopefully it is clear that right from the conceptual phase of any major project the dialogue with people needs to take place. These people will be staff that work in the project as well as people affected by the project. For large projects that have an impact on local communities, eg the building of a new hospital, the provision of new sports facilities, the change of land use from recreational to retail park, factory relocations, etc. All these projects need ideas, consensus, feelings, cautionary words, advice, identification of risks, etc. From this chaos of data the project manager can then understand the true benefits being sought, the risks involved and the pressure groups and views of the key stakeholders.

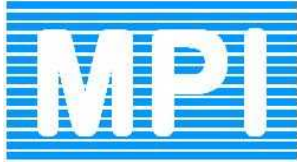
Having understood the issues, risks, etc. it is the project manager's task to then communicate, build teams, provide leadership, manage conflict and negotiate between the diverse set of views and opinions. Above all he works towards delivering the benefits of the project, not just delivering the desired outcomes.

The good project manager will continue running campaigns with all stakeholders throughout the project's life cycle to ensure that the focus is maintained on the benefits of the project, despite some of the painful or disruptive effects of the project, and to keep abreast of changes that might cause the project to be put at risk of overspend, underachieve, or simply be late in delivering the benefits.

Information Overload



In order to manage the plethora of information from stakeholders, the good project manager should have a readily available and simple to use service that helps to generate innovative ideas that are relevant to the needs of his project.



That service should also make it easy to evaluate ideas, risks, suggestions, feelings, etc. so he can quickly determine which ideas are most likely to be most successful and apply “risk management” techniques to those that threaten his project.. Lastly, because project managers and support staff are busy and expensive to employ the service must be fast to set up, easy to use, require little culture change and be serviced by professionals who understand innovation and who are at your service whenever you need them.

In Conclusion

As a one-time professional project manager and now CEO at Micro Planning International Ltd, I am excited by the idea of running projects using two great pieces of complimentary software namely

1. Micro Planner from the Micro Planning International group of companies for the task planning, resource scheduling and full project management.
Visit www.microplanning.co.uk for a downloadable demo version.
2. Jenni from the Jeffrey and Panida Baumgartner (JPB) group of companies for innovation management.

Your Ideas Are Valued

If you wish to add your own ideas on how these two software products can work together, or how they can be applied to your projects then please call. We will be delighted to hear from you.

Best Regards

John Cornish, Chartered Marketer, MBA, FCIM, MAPM

CEO at Micro Planning International Ltd

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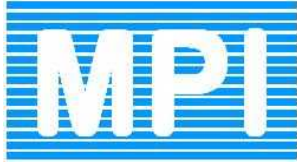
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**About John Cornish, Chartered Marketer,
MBA, FCIM, MAPM**

John Cornish, now CEO at Micro Planning International Ltd., enjoyed a career spanning twenty-nine years in high tech electronic engineering companies with over twelve years of practical experience in managing major projects. He worked for an International company based in San Jose, California that developed, sold and supported automated test equipment (ATE) used in the semiconductor industry. His global industrial experience includes projects with UK and European Telecoms and Defence companies and later with major semiconductor manufacturers in America, Europe and the Far East.



John gained an MBA in 1995, and was welcomed into membership of the Association for Project Managers (APM) and is a Fellow of The Chartered Institute of Marketing (The CIM) and has been a Chartered Marketer since 2006. In 2006 John launched Cornish Business Resources Ltd offering marketing and project management services. On 19th November he strategically changed the company's name to Micro Planning International Ltd to provide better focus and to work more closely with the group of MPI companies and their customers in Europe, America, Australia and Asia.

About Micro Planning International Inc.

Based in Denver, Colorado, under the CEO Robert A. (Andy) Killinger, Micro Planning International Inc. has been committed to providing full service project management products to the world since 1978. MPI provides state-of-the-art planning systems for the Macintosh and Windows platforms as well as post-sale services such as training, consulting and custom development. The Denver office provides the development resources for the continuing enhancement of the Micro Planner range of products and has produced several bespoke versions of Micro Planner for major clients.