

“WINNING OVER THE AUDIENCE”

By Ken May, Internal Auditor, Isle of Wight Council

The past twelve months or so has been a journey, if not epic, certainly memorable, for those at the Isle of Wight Council who were given the mandate to make a difference through project management – and more importantly – move the organisation through denial to acceptance that we could do better, much better.

My role is Internal Auditor (IT) with the Isle of Wight Council currently on secondment to establish a Project Support Office. Since working for Gillingham Borough Council in 1983, I have been involved, in equal measure, in programme management, project management, project support and internal auditing – continually facilitating change. I have gained a wealth of experience in establishing project support offices for organisations such as Sun Life Financial of Canada and Legal & General. At the Isle of Wight I am using the opportunity to acquire and rollout a methodology and a toolkit specifically designed to assist everyone working on projects - a project in its own right. I am often to be found at the heart of the organisational change agenda whether it is programme or project managing or support and providing assurance services - that's a pretty big agenda on the Island at this time.

Accepting that we could do better

Increasing expectations placed on local government mean that there are more projects on the go at any one time and the ability to consistently deliver projects is increasingly becoming a measure of our effectiveness. Unfortunately, when we were measured, it wasn't very flattering!

The Isle of Wight Council spends many millions a year on project related activity and it is vital that this investment and effort delivers real business benefits. The Isle of Wight Council, typical of many small to medium councils, had adopted no corporate wide project management methodology, instead trusting to the experience and skill of staff entrusted with projects. If you want to know where your organisation is in terms of maturity ask one of your managers to define a project!!

Having established that something needed to be done, the next step was to understand what needed to be done and how to approach the task. Like so many initiatives we start, it grew out of all proportions very quickly.

PRINCE2™ Friend of Foe?

Having researched best practice, we are using this opportunity to implement the OGC's recommendation for Local Government to follow PRINCE2™.

Our greatest challenge was to overcome a mindset that, at one end of the spectrum, was sceptical that a formal methodology was needed and at the other, that the implementation of a toolset would, in itself, resolve all our problems. Navigating a middle course has been very challenging.

The key was training and the selection of a tool that supported the considerable investment in training. However, our selection process very quickly recognised that the selection of a training provider and the content of training could not be divorced from the toolset that we also wanted to implement.

Matching the training to the support tool

Many organisations invest in training their project management staff but do not provide the systems and processes to support them. Much of their time and investment is lost because staff continue to reinvent the wheel or revert to old practices. To take full advantage of our considerable investment, we needed to choose our support tool simultaneously.

We discovered that many of the products on the market are either Project Management scheduling tools, financial tools or document management tools. We needed all of these components as well as PRINCE2™ compliance. We did not have the resources internally to create our own tool, and it would not have been cost effective to do so. i-method was the only product we found that successfully combined these essential requirements as well as being PRINCE2™ compliant and independently accredited by the APM Group as meeting OGC Best Practice guidance on project management. Together we set about tailoring the “i-method” to our own internal practices and processes.

We needed:

- a software that supported our methods and removed much of the real and perceived burden of the admin
- a software that linked to the training provided at each level
- a software that supported scalability
- a software that supported gateway reviews
- a partner that understands what we are trying to do

The “i-method” software tool is intranet based and provides access to all current project data enabling online and offline access to project scheduling, authorisations, templates, etc, whilst ensuring PRINCE2™ compliance and removing the associated bureaucracy.

Size is important!

We quickly established that one size does not fit all. Although we needed to apply a methodology to our project management, we also needed to win the hearts and minds of the project management community. There was already a perception that PRINCE2™ is bureaucratic, cumbersome, difficult to scale and written in a different language. To ensure we do not 'use a sledge hammer to crack a walnut'; we are developing 'The Tariff'.

The Tariff Approach

The Tariff is being developed as a tool to measure the business criticality of our projects. When complete and tested we intend to use the Tariff to determine if the piece of work that is about to be started is, in fact, a project, and if it is classified as a project, of what type – the type determines the extent to which the full project management methodology is to be used.

Major Project – full method (e.g., Full documentation, Initiation stage + multiple other stages, multiple products)

Moderate Project – reduced method (e.g., Full documentation [but common content], Initiation Stage + 1 other stage, multiple products)

Minor Project – 'minimal' method (e.g., reduced documentation, single stage, single product)

I'm a great believer in treating all work as projects so that they can be controlled. After all, in terms of resource consumption and arguably impact, what is the difference between 10 people each working individually on 10 projects costing £5k each and 10 people working on one project costing £50k? It's just a matter of scale; control is equally important in both scenarios and 'small projects' often end up becoming all consuming.

There are two sections to The Tariff questionnaire, the first covers cost, risk and impact of the project.

First, work out how much capital and revenue cost you anticipate over the next 5 years:

- Cost: Do the total costs over five years come to more than £25,000?
- Risk: Would the Council/your service be damaged, would service be affected or disrupted if it went wrong?
- Impact: Does your project change the way service is delivered or structured, involve/affect external partners, or involve partnership agreements, contracts or Service Level Agreements?

Any 'yes' answer indicates a 'major' project. The second section looks at the projects scope and helps to identify the input which may be needed from various corporate functions. Areas considered include: Buildings; Staff; ICT; Money; Processes; Structures; Partners/3rd Parties; Stakeholders in the Outcome; legislation; policy/strategy; Communications/PR; Consultation. Answers here can indicate a 'major' project even if that was not established in Section 1.

There is also a separate spreadsheet to assess the project risk (Gateway) – this feeds another (Cost/Benefit/Strategic fit or CBS fit), along with other assessments to determine if the project is worthwhile – assessing Strategic Fit, Benefits, Costs and Risk.

We are building The Tariff into the "i-method" as a pre project definition step providing a single portal for project governance.

Support

Ownership was and is still an issue, which is why a Project Support function remains as essential as rolling out training and the toolset – the most common question asked by anyone involved in projects was "where do I get support from?" – Even if a Project Support Office does not own projects it can effectively sign-post to the support and ensure that anyone starting a project does not feel that they have to re-invent the entire wheel.

The "i-method" also provides us with a virtual support office, enabling us to share project data, risks and issues and learn from our experiences, again saving time and effort re-inventing documentation, etc.

In reality, the project community is still relatively small, many of those involved fall into the category of "usual suspects" – it is still nonetheless challenging to ensure that communication is effective.

We have and continue to learn some very important lessons from what we are doing – but having created a critical mass of practitioners we have a much better chance of obtaining the benefits we saw at the start – better run projects, delivering better outcomes.

The May 2005 elections changed political control of the Authority with the new administration placing great emphasis on high performance and cost effectiveness. The Council's key projects are changing and the inevitable restructuring process is underway. This is an opportunity to establish a project support function. What ever the outcome "i-method" will certainly be playing a major role in securing delivery of the new administrations priorities.

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