Creating & Sustaining Momentum in IT Programs: A Handbook

By leading with authority, reinforcing goals, and taking decisive actions to side-step problems, project leaders can avoid inertia and sustain the momentum needed to ensure the success of enterprise IT projects.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It’s no secret that many enterprise IT projects fall short of expectations. Indeed, market research firm Gartner estimates that fully 20% to 25% of all ERP implementations end up over budget, fail to yield the expected benefits, or are abandoned altogether. Moreover, a full 50% to 60% of these projects were compromised in some way, typically due to a failure to clearly define and articulate the expected benefits.¹

This scenario, although surprisingly common, is by no means the standard. By adhering to two basic principles, project managers and their teams can help ensure a successful result:

• Verify that the project strategy, IT requirements, project teams, and business objectives are in place and communicated to all participants early on.

• The second, and arguably more challenging, requirement is to maintain momentum once a project is underway, even when encountering obstacles. If the pace of the project slows down, it can be regained, but only with decisive leadership and a clear vision.

Executives and project leaders must be prepared to quickly address and overcome stumbling blocks that inevitably arise over the course of an IT transformation project. It is especially important to continually communicate the critical nature of the program to project teams, end users, and upper management across the enterprise to keep the effort top of mind from the start. Otherwise, the objectives and value of the project can blur – hampering decision making, slowing the work’s pulse and impeding progress.²

The consequences of inertia can be severe – from negating hard-won gains and compromising the project’s integrity, to weakening the business case, losing competitive ground, and in some instances, curbing profitable growth.³ With the stakes this high, it is vital that companies learn what they can do to keep their IT projects manageable and on track – with less risk, and a better chance of success.
FRAMING IT PROJECTS

CIO magazine cited a recent survey by Innotas, which found that 55 percent of the 126 IT professionals surveyed between January and March 2015 reported a project fail — up from 32 percent in 2014. Why are success rates so poor? The short answer is that far too many program sponsors do not focus on sustaining the momentum gained in the early project stages.

Today’s professional project managers are normally diligent about ensuring that the basic “hygiene factors” required for a well-managed project are addressed. These include:

• Defining the expected business outcome.
• Gaining appropriate sponsorship and recruiting a project champion within a business function.
• Selecting a development team that bridges the gap between IT and business operations.
• Developing an IT blueprint/prototype early on to help minimize risk.
• Modifying management styles at different stages of the program — using a flexible approach during the development phase, and a stricter, more structured approach during implementation.

Yet despite these measures, projects often flounder. We believe the problem can be traced to physics; specifically, the science of momentum. This view is supported by the Harvard Business Review’s 2016 analysis of 8,000 global companies, which concluded that “The roots of success or failure increasingly lie in the ability of companies to remain fast, perceptive, innovative, and adaptable.”

QUICK TAKE

Linear Momentum

\[ P = MV \]

Momentum = mass \times velocity

In physics terms, momentum is the quantity of motion that an object has.

The concept of momentum applies in everyday life, and is a commonly used term in sports. An athlete who is gaining speed in a race is said to be gaining momentum. An athlete with greater momentum will reach the finish line faster. Similarly, an IT project team with greater momentum will achieve the expected business outcomes sooner.

Momentum within an organization is visible in employees’ enthusiasm to tackle an opportunity, generate and share ideas, and build camaraderie around the solution.
Projects usually sustain momentum up to a certain point, then stall following the excitement of generating ideas and the initial buy-in.

This type of momentum is highly relevant to IT projects, and key to building support and driving results. However, it does not garner as much attention as factors related to satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and is not always easy to sustain.

**WHY PROJECTS LOSE MOMENTUM**

Projects usually sustain momentum up to a certain point, then stall following the excitement of generating ideas and the initial buy-in. Reality then sets in and the project staggers through a period of declining momentum.

For example, an enterprise chooses commercial, off-the-shelf software to support its IT project. Internal IT staff are brought in, resources are allocated, hardware is purchased, and rollouts are planned. In other words, a promising start. Nonetheless, the project team fails to anticipate and factor in issues that can cause problems later in the project cycle, such as having to compete for resources during other major enterprise programs, or accommodate team members’ vacations and sick days.

We refer to these disruptions as “warthogs” – ready to intervene and derail a project when least expected. They can be particularly harmful when a project is at a critical stage, such as deciding the best approach for deploying the program.

Unless these roadblocks are managed effectively from the outset, projects can suffer a steep decline in momentum – eventually reaching a critical juncture that may compromise the entire organization. The actions managers take at this point can determine the success or failure of a program. Indeed, of the 377 business leaders polled by the Harvard Business Review, 94% stated that internal dysfunction – not lack of opportunity or competitors’ capabilities – was the main barrier to their continued profitable growth.
A major UK grocery retailer engaged us to deliver a multi-year IT change management program with far-reaching impacts on all areas of its business. Due to the project’s complexity, significant planning was required to get the project off the ground. Considerable time was invested in assembling internal resources, building the business case, and conducting due diligence. A project blueprint that included 20-plus best-in-class deliverables and a select project team was approved. All the conditions for success were in place.

Nonetheless, the project ground to a halt shortly after the work began. Rather than sustaining the momentum from the blueprint phase, inertia set in. What happened? We can point to three contributing factors:

• Multiple layers of governance required the project team to go through several stages of approval before they could present the project design to the Board of Directors.

• A negative experience with another IT vendor from a previous project then came into play – necessitating another unanticipated “lessons learned” review of the already lengthy governance process.

• The collaborative nature of the grocer’s culture and its “management by committee” mindset tacked more time onto the schedule.

The consequences of this “stop-start” process approach compromised the expected business outcomes of the program:
• The project’s burn rate continued as previous timelines were pushed out before any benefits could be recouped.

• An information vacuum led to miscommunications and hearsay.

• The plan shifted six months to the right – a delay that was compounded by the peak trading period.

• Key SMEs from third-party vendors left the project, taking their knowledge and skills – and their experience with the company – with them.

• There was no central entity to drive performance and maintain team morale.

This experience, though not unheard of in large, complex IT programs, underscores the importance of maintaining momentum at every stage.

When the project did resume, it was necessary to spend time and resources revisiting the good work that went into blueprinting the program and energizing the project team. (See Quick Take, p. 9).
Getting a project back on track once it has reached a critical juncture requires genuine leadership and decisiveness; it is not something that happens by following a project management methodology.

MAINTAINING & REGAINING MOMENTUM

There are seven steps program managers can take to maintain and/or regain the momentum of their IT projects. Ideally, these actions should be considered at the beginning of a program; however, if the project loses its momentum, it’s not too late to consider these safeguards to help regain it:

• **Enable timely decisions.** Ensure that your project has the support needed to activate and adhere to program requirements. Select and align the right decision makers in advance; ensure they have the information they need to take calculated risks.

• **Create passion through vision.** Build excitement among project teams and sponsors by visualizing the end goal and the role they will play in achieving it.

• **Obtain commitment, with visible dates.** Make sure that all team members commit fully to performing specific tasks within a specified timeframe. Make this commitment known to everyone involved in the program.

• **Set a reasonable pace.** Be realistic about the progress you expect to see; aim to crawl, walk, or run as appropriate.

• **Avoid gaps.** If possible, do not allow resources to be reassigned in the middle of the project. This will cause delays and hamper productivity as people get back up to speed.

• **Implement feedback mechanisms.** Develop an “early warning” system by ensuring that feedback channels are in place to identify challenges and pockets of resistance early in the project cycle.

• **Celebrate “quick wins.”** Make it a point to acknowledge project milestones and recognize those who help achieve positive results. Gain organizational consensus, and encourage peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing.

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Reclaiming Momentum

We recently helped the UK grocer referenced earlier reignite its IT change management program, supported by a team that is re-energized and united by a common vision. Today, the project is back on track – hitting milestones and rapidly building momentum. How did we do it?

The first step was to obtain buy-in from the company’s key leaders by listening to their concerns and demonstrating that we had the resources and capabilities to help fulfill the program’s objectives. We also secured a commitment from the Board of Directors that they would remain invested in the project’s success and were prepared to be visible, accountable project sponsors.

Next, we focused on creating a campaign that would clearly and consistently communicate the program’s objectives. This was critical both for maintaining morale within the project team and building excitement across the company’s wider population. The client’s business and operations teams were brought in to help run focus groups and develop messages that would resonate with employees. We then mobilized a network of “change champions” and subject matter experts from all areas of the business – equipping them with “leading through change” coaching skills to help their teams navigate the transformation.

This “re-ignition” also required resetting and baselining the project plan to define stage-gate entry and exit criteria for each phase, and build confidence that the project would remain on schedule and on budget. The implementation plan was paired with a proven change management approach and strategy for project teams to follow.
Finally, we tightened dependency management among project activities to better anticipate and address problems down the road. Flushing out these potential “warts-hogs” adds another level of control, and assurance that the project will stay on track.

These efforts are already paying off:

• The team celebrates achievements, and morale remains high.
• Accountable and visible leaders are in place to help drive and manage change.
• Collaborative workstreams keep teams focused on the same goal: designing a future-proof, enterprise-strength IT program that will meet the company’s near- and long-term objectives.

Today, the program is back on course and set for sustainable success. Still, much of the time and work expended to bring it to this point could have been avoided if the importance of momentum had been fully understood and steps were taken to manage and sustain it from the very beginning.
PEOPLE & BUSINESS BENEFITS

Creating, maintaining, and regaining project momentum not only benefits the IT organization and those directly involved in the project, but also the entire enterprise.

Sustaining momentum is good for the business because objectives are achieved faster and with less disruption. Projects are easier to manage and keep on track; working from a standing start requires much more effort.

Momentum also benefits project participants because people prefer working on fast-paced initiatives, rather than grinding through a program that is essentially on life support.

LOOKING FORWARD

Successful enterprise programs with an IT component require project leaders to adhere to two fundamental principles: Ensure that basic hygiene factors are in place and that expected outcomes will deliver true business benefits. Create and sustain momentum throughout the project lifecycle – or regain it quickly when it is lost.

We believe that momentum is a critical aspect of IT transformation, with far-reaching impacts that will pay short and long-term dividends to the entire business.
FOOTNOTES


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ABOUT COGNIZANT DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION CONSULTING

Cognizant Business Consulting’s Digital Transformation Practice helps enterprises deliver their strategies by partnering with them to develop and deploy innovative solutions for business-critical imperatives – sharing risks with confidence. The entire organization is focused on turning clients’ visions and strategies into successful, real-world results. We achieve this by employing the best in the business and working with clients with a single-minded focus and a pragmatic, hands-on approach to effect positive business, technology, and organizational change.

ABOUT COGNIZANT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT (OCM)

Cognizant’s UK OCM Practice is a growing team of specialists dedicated to change management. We help clients achieve their goals and capitalize on their technology investments by placing people at the heart of their transformation programs. We help ensure that the strategic elements of operational change and leadership are successfully achieved through effective, timely interventions that help companies embed new technologies and transform the way they do business.

ABOUT COGNIZANT

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