Don't make the same misteak twice

By David Hillson

Organizations conduct projects for at least two reasons. The first is to generate project deliverables which will create benefits and value as defined in the project charter or business case. But each project also has a second purpose, which is to contribute to organisational learning. Project-based organizations should use completed projects to create a body of knowledge and experience on which they can draw in order to complete future projects more successfully. Unfortunately this second aspect is missing from many organizations, including those which regularly perform projects, and as a result they deny themselves a major source of potential benefits.

The post-project review is intended to capture lessons that can be learned from previous projects and applied to new ones. However post-project reviews are one of the least well performed parts of the project lifecycle, for at least three reasons:

- Organizations tend to disband project teams immediately on project completion, moving staff on to new projects before they have a chance to capture their knowledge and experience in a structured and usable way.
- In a cost-constrained environment, post-project reviews can be seen as an optional luxury.
- Many organizations lack the knowledge management infrastructure to take advantage of previous experience, and feel that there is no point in recording information which is never used.

Outputs from a post-project review are usually called 'lessons learned'. Unfortunately this may be overoptimistic, as lessons are only truly learned when they have been implemented on a future project. As a result, it might be better to call these either 'lessons identified' or 'lessons to be learned'.

One important area where future similar projects can benefit is identification of risk-related lessons. Organizations need to avoid making the same mistakes twice, either in terms of being hit by problems which could have been foreseen as threats, or missing benefits which could have been spotted as opportunities. This element is usually not included as a dis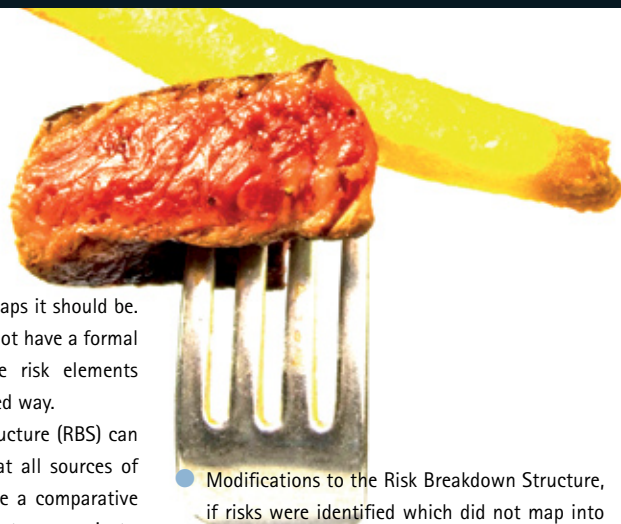tinct step in the formal project risk management process, though perhaps it should be. Even where an organization does not have a formal post-project review, at least the risk elements should be considered in a structured way.

The project Risk Breakdown Structure (RBS) can act as a framework to ensure that all sources of risk are considered, and to provide a comparative structure for transferring lessons between projects. For each element of the RBS in turn, ask these questions:

- What were the main risks identified (both threats and opportunities)? Do any of these represent generic risks that might affect similar projects?
- Which foreseeable threats actually occurred, and why? Which identified opportunities that could have been captured were missed, and why?
- Which issues or problems occurred that should have been foreseen as threats? Which unplanned benefits arose that should have been identified as opportunities?
- What preventative actions could have been taken to minimise or avoid threats? What proactive actions could have been taken to maximise or exploit opportunities?
- Which responses were effective in managing risks, and which were ineffective?
- How much effort was spent on the risk process, both to execute the process, and to implement responses?
- Can any specific benefits be attributed to the risk process, eg, reduced project duration or cost, increased business benefits or client satisfaction etc?
- Where any elements of the risk process particularly effective or ineffective? How could the process have been improved (including tips and hints on using the various tools and techniques)?

The results from this review should produce a range of recommendations including:

- Risks to be added to the organisation's risk checklist, for consideration during the risk identification step for future similar projects.
- Modifications to the Risk Breakdown Structure, if risks were identified which did not map into the existing RBS framework.
- Proactive and preventative actions to be included in the strategy for future similar projects to address the types of risks likely to be encountered.
- Changes to the risk process to improve effectiveness, either in use of tools or techniques, or in development of standard templates to support the process.

Just as the post-project review is intended to be a vital closing part of the project management process, in the same way it is essential that risk-related lessons are recorded so that reusable knowledge and experience is not lost to the organization. There is nothing worse than hearing a project team say 'This risk happens on all our projects', Identifying 'risk lessons to be learned' will ensure that common threats are avoided and frequent opportunities are captured, leading to more consistent delivery of successful projects.

About the author

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