

Project Complexity – an experience

Despite being busy with never ending MS Teams and Zoom meetings which have become a way of business life, and which start earlier and earlier I was fortunate to join the recent ICCPM online seminar “*What Makes a Project Complex*” presented by Collin Smith, it was excellent. It brought back vivid memories of a technology project I participated in hence this brief article to mention some of the unexpected challenges that we faced that moved the project from “normal” to “complex” and particularly from my perspective being responsible for the project management. OK, I can hear your now asking what is a “normal” project.....maybe I’ll do another article “The Normal Project!”

As I was saying before being interrupted, the project was a technology project which in itself was complex as technology projects so often are, however, this is to be expected so I always make sure that I am well prepared with good detailed planning and scheduling to try and ensure that all runs smoothly except as



Collin mentioned in his webinar unexpected events can happen which make a project complex, in fact, when several unexpected things happen the project becomes very complex. Suffice to say that none of the five events that happened were expected or foreseen at the outset of the project or at least in the case of the regulatory changes to the extent that they transpired i.e. different for each country and all with increased level of compliance detail.

Initially our project was a typical, shall we say, “contained project” that is it was internal or contained within the global enterprise that owned and instigated the project.

This started to change when it was realised that the project would be larger than originally envisaged and that there would be other partners (investment, technology, commercial) involved, this of course meant engaging with an increasing number of stakeholders and having to accommodate a myriad of distractions as the project could so easily be pulled in different directions so it was important to ensure that it remained clearly goal directed and that all parties were onboard, focused and using the same project schedule.

The next issue was the growth in scope. Not so much a conventional scope increase but geographical so that within a short space of time the project had elements in a variety of locations other than the UK i.e. USA, Scandinavia, Germany, Middle East, China and North Africa. These other locations were in some respects quite diverse time wise and culturally, which was both interesting and exciting but also challenging. This understandably added another layer of complexity onto the project.



Then an unexpected and certainly unforeseen occurrence happened which added yet another layer of complexity, the project owners went through a corporate re-structuring and divested some businesses which included some key team members of our project, it did not stop there as we also lost some important project resources through key players deciding to take the unexpected offer of early retirement.

Next, and following closely on the heels of the aforementioned increases in complexity was the announcement of future regulatory changes happening in different regions and countries that would affect the commercialisation of this technology project. This was not all together a surprise as we were aware from the outset that we would have to comply with specific regulations, however what was not expected was the complexity of the new regulations, timing of compliance and the overly complex tax implications.

And finally, Covid happened. Covid meant adjusting and coping with restrictions (travel/visits, etc.) together with new ways of working (Remote, home based, etc.), this all necessitated an increase / improvement in communications and reporting as well as learning how to maximise collaboration tools such as video conferencing for meetings and knowledge transfer, so the project team stays informed, organised, and connected.

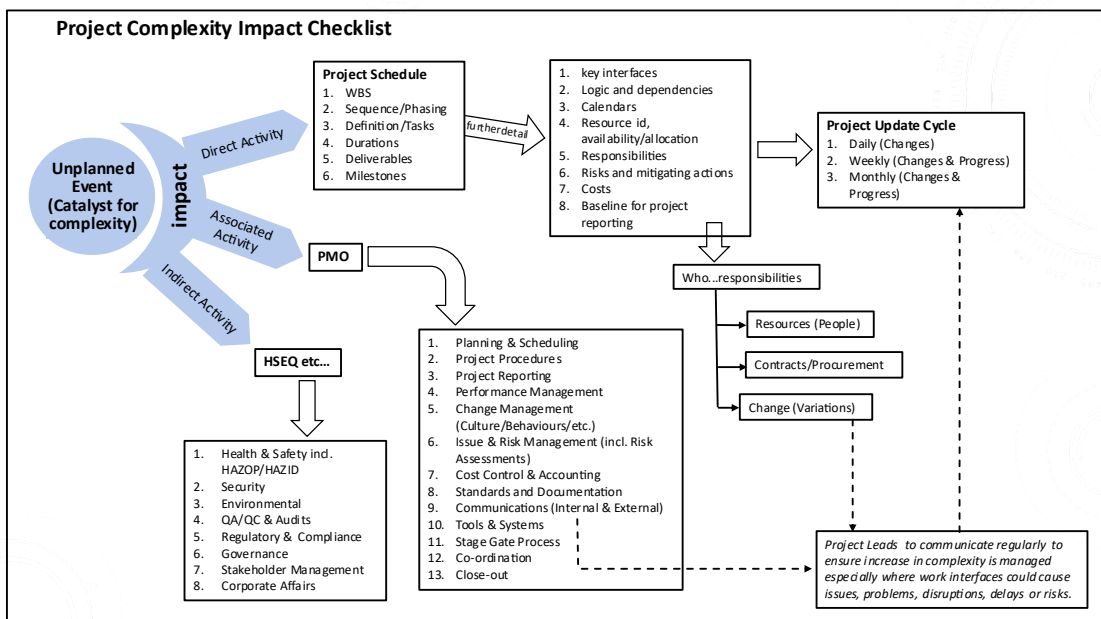


So now our straightforward project had become complex due to a) directional change due to the addition of partners (stakeholders), b) moving from a single country location to multi-country locations (multiple time zones), c) significant corporate organisational changes causing

disruption and loss of key resources, d) increase in size and levels of regulatory requirements that needed to be met and e) The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) happened which to say the least was unexpected and certainly added to the complexity of our already complex project.

It was vital that the core values of project management were maintained at all times as these significantly helped in integrating the continual changes, disruptions and expansion in scope that dramatically increased the complexity of the project. The basics that were maintained and communicated included the project organisation, the work breakdown structure of the project scope, the project schedule, risk and issue logs, contact details, meetings schedules and reporting.

What was specifically done in order to minimise potential disruption to the project and cause delay was that every time a major incident (change or addition) occurred we would recognise and quantify it immediately and expand the project management effort to cope with the increased level of complexity so that it was both formally recognised and controlled.



I developed a simple checklist (Shown above) for the project that we could run through every time an unexpected occurrence happened so that we could immediately take whatever action was needed from a project management perspective in order to keep the project focused, on track and under control.

It just goes to show how diverse events or occurrences can with little or no warning significantly impact a project and make it complex.

Any questions or queries please email, and I will be happy to answer (if I can).

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I have been involved with projects since 1970, a founding member of APM, a Chartered Engineer, experience in both Capital Projects and Business Programmes (M&A) in many countries around the world mostly in the energy, oil and gas (offshore), petrochemicals and infrastructure sectors. More recently involved in renewables, e-fuels, green hydrogen and biofuel projects.