Innovative Practices for IT Projects

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Abstract Based on 57 interviews with senior IT project managers in the UK Canada, USA and
New Zealand, this article presents innovative practices they have developed during difficult projects. In
our respondents’ view, traditional project management methods and techniques are only a starting
point. Through their quotes, they show how one has to be creative and entrepreneurial to lead projects
successfully.

Keywords project management, innovation, information technology project

Recent studies have shown that IT-based projects have started to deliver better performance compared with the
mid-1990s (Sauer, Gemino, & Reich, 2007; Johnson, 1995; Hartmann, 2006). This improvement is intriguing because
research has also found that projects are increasing in complexity both organizationally and technologically.
This study was initiated to discover what project managers were doing that might explain the increased performance.

One common characteristic encountered was an unflinching realism about the challenges of IT projects. For
example, senior project managers understand that their project teams are rarely on a well-defined journey
where time, schedule and scope can be controlled tightly, where the milestones are fixed and clearly marked. Rather, they are on an expedition. Along the
way, the unexpected happens and plans are challenged, if not destroyed.

This realism has resulted in project managers addressing the three deficiencies of traditional project manage-
ment: (a) inattention to the importance of customers; (b) narrow definition of what project management should
be concerned with; and (c) single-minded focus on a fixed set of tools and techniques (Frame, 2002, pp. 6, 7). They
accept that if the world has changed for the project cli-
tent then, however difficult it might be, they must do
whatever will assist the client. If this means change to
the project specification and scope then they accept it.
They understand that the responsibilities of project man-
agement extend beyond established boundaries. Where
once project managers took defined terms of reference
and strove to deliver a technology product, today’s real-
ism means that it makes sense to be more involved in
project formulation and justification activities and in
post-implementation benefit delivery. They use a wide
variety of innovative approaches. While they do not dis-
regard the best practices of traditional project manage-
ment, they bravely step away from adhering strictly to
the “thou-shalts.” In this article, we share their insights
and methods in the hope that they will be useful to the-
ory building as well as practice.

The practices in this article are not meant to be comprehen-
sive. They are a synthesis of the most interesting tech-
niques that our 57 informants shared in interviews. In our
view, each technique has a time and a place where it will
be most useful. Its application will be a matter of judg-
ment for the individual project manager. However, the
underlying assumption is that they are most important to
consider for tough projects—projects where the client or
project organization is complex, the requirements are not
well understood, where changes in industry or business
strategy occur, or where technology is immature.

Many of these practices may seem counterintuitive,
especially to project managers who have been taught to
follow accepted best practices and methodologies care-
fully. We see them as appropriate innovations in the face
of the need for resilience and adaptiveness. We make the
case for their appropriateness when we describe each
innovation below.