

Expert project management can have spectacular results, but only a benchmark of professionalism for the sector can bring greater success, reports **Thea Jourdan**

Effective project management (PM) is the key to success of any major undertaking, and the stakes are high. The money currently being spent on the UK's 43 most complex projects in government alone tops £200 billion.

A project manager has overall responsibility for planning a project, making sure it is carried out on time and to budget, and that it achieves its aims. Get it right, like the new station for Wembley Stadium, and the project completes early with all the boxes ticked and lots of happy football fans. Get project management wrong, such as with the well-known issues with the computerised NHS Care Records Service, and there can be a large cost burden and all-round exasperation.

At present, success rates are not universally high; according to some reports, up to 70 per cent of all projects fail or do not achieve what they set out to do. So how to ensure project management is efficient, stays within budget and produces excellent outcomes?

BAE Systems has placed effective project management at the heart of its business, says Peter Fielder, the company's managing director, Performance Excellence. "Reliable, predictable and repeatable project performance is what our customers need from us and is what generates value for the BAE Systems shareholders in terms of profit and cash," he says. "The capability to effectively manage complex engineering programmes, and the future development of that capability, is central to our success."

Cost effectiveness will become more critical as the economy still struggles to recover. The sector shrank by 4.8 per cent in 2009, according to the *Arras People Benchmark Report 2010*, and predicted public sector cuts are likely to have a negative impact on many PM consultants.

The Association for Project Management thinks that the key to excellent outcomes lies with a universally recognised professional standard. "It's vitally

important that everyone has the same idea of what professionalism in the sector looks like," says Mike Nichols, chairman of the APM. "At the moment, according to research we have carried out, there is some confusion.

"And although differences of opinion exist, there is a well-supported requirement for a single recognised and valued quality professional standard in project management."

After a consultation period last year, the APM has defined five dimensions, or professional values of professionalism. These are breadth of knowledge, depth of competence, the demonstration of achievement through professional qualifications, commitment through continuing professional development and

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accountability through adherence to a code of professional conduct.

And the organisation is keen to spread the word beyond its own membership of 18,293 men and women. "For the next few years, we've committed the APM's major strategic objective to increasing the awareness and achievement of these five dimensions of professionalism right across the many organisations committed to the ongoing improvement of project management capability," says Nichols. Fittingly, the forthcoming APM Project Management Conference (October 21, 2010) will focus on the theme of Building the Future in Partnership.

Currently, there are many professional organisations which represent PMs in the UK and many routes to becoming a PM professional. A high number of opinion formers are now convinced that there needs to be a period of rationalisation. "There are organisations – such as APM, the Project Management Institute (PMI), Office of Government Commerce (OGC), APM Group and BSI – which provide accreditations, tools and training courses," says Lindsay Scott, (pictured, left) co-director of specialist recruiters Arras People. "All have different views on project management and much to offer, but it is difficult to find a single recognised and valued quality standard."

Even the OGC home of PRINCE2, which is historically the qualification of choice for the public sector, seems to be encouraging PRINCE2 practitioners to consider the merits of the APMP, which is the APM's benchmark qualification.

Despite the wide range of qualification

providers, there are still gaping holes in the PM curriculum, according to Scott. She believes the present curriculum is "too narrow" and should be enlarged to include "soft" skills, such as leadership, negotiation and communication.

Dr Nicholas Clarke, a senior lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Southampton's School of Management, is conducting research into the role of Emotional Intelligence in the workplace. He agrees the curriculum is skewed. "For too long," he says, "the project management field has focused on planning tools and techniques without appreciating that much of project management depends on getting good relationships going, and picking up when other members of the project may be having problems."

A positive outlook is also crucial. Rear Admiral Tim Chittenden is director of project management at BAE Systems Submarine Solutions. He oversees teams which manage hugely complex projects, including the Astute submarine programme. "It is probably one of the most complex projects in the world, not just because of the scale of the components and the way they are all tied together, but because of the need to manage the expectations of stakeholders, deal with supply pressures and cope with the unexpected."

A more united cohesive profession seems inevitable as project management matures and draws increasingly closer to chartered status. The APM says that it is "committed to achieving Chartered status within as short a timescale as possible."