The FBI Virtual Case File: A Case Study

Jack T. Marchewka
Northern Illinois University
jmarchewka@niu.edu

ABSTRACT

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began developing a case management software system called the Virtual Case File in 2000, but eventually abandoned the project in April 2005. The cost of this project was estimated to be over $170 million, and this waste of tax payer money drew sharp criticism. The impetus for the project was due to the FBI's aging technology infrastructure that included 386-based personal computers and a 12-year-old network system. In 2000, Congress allocated almost $340 million for the proposed FBI Information Technology Upgrade Project (FITUP) that was soon divided into three parts and renamed Trilogy. This project was scheduled to take three years and included an enterprise-wide upgrade of desktop hardware and software and the implementation of a more modern and secure network. In addition, a Virtual Case File system would include a case management system, an evidence management system, and a records management system that would replace the FBI's antiquated case management system which limited the FBI's ability to carry out its mission effectively. This study provides a qualitative analysis of this IT project failure. More specifically, this study attempts to answer the questions: Was the failure of the FBI's Virtual Case File project unique? Or does it share common characteristics with other IT project failures? This case study should be of interest to IT academics in terms of teaching project management or as a theoretical basis for guiding future research. This study should also be of interest to IT practitioners in terms of understanding some important project management challenges when attempting to implement an IT solution.

INTRODUCTION

Managing information technology (IT) projects continues to be an ongoing challenge for many organizations worldwide. For example, a survey conducted by the Standish Group (1995) called CHAOS drew attention to what many called the software crisis when it reported that only 16 percent of the application development projects were successful in terms of being completed on time and within budget. Moreover, about 31 percent of the projects were canceled before completion, while 53 percent were completed but over budget, over schedule, and not meeting original specifications. The average cost overrun for a medium-size company surveyed was about 182 percent of the original estimate, while the average schedule overrun was about 202 percent. That is, the results of the survey suggest that a medium-size project estimated to cost about $1 million and take a year to develop actually cost about $1.8 million, took just over two years to complete, and only included about 65 percent of the envisioned features and functions.

However, the original CHAOS study published in 1994 was the first of several studies conducted every two years by the Standish Group. Figure 1 provides a summary of the CHAOS studies conducted from 1994 through 2006. Although, in general, it appears that the percentage of