

Executing a Complex Program in Indian Public Sector

Ashish Sadekar

SAS India



Leveraging project management for excellence, growth and transformation



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A Thought Paper

Indian Public Sector is slowly waking up to Information Technology (IT) story. The Indian Public Sector is a white elephant with hundreds of rules and processes and yes, a very rigid mindset to change for the current times. And to top it, no government official carries an accountability to execute a project. Almost none in government has heard of IT or the way IT helps business, leave aside executing a project. This paper presents how a project needs to be executed in such a complex environment where the implementing partner has to play the role of customer project manager too. This paper also explains the blended methodology approach of waterfall model and Scrum required in Indian Public Sector scenario which can lead to a successful execution of the project.

1.1 Introduction


The Indian Public Sector is waking up to technology and trying to leap ahead and join the commercial counterparts. The Indian Public sector has realized that transparency, efficiency and productivity can be significantly increased with IT and will lead to change the perception of the government. The central government has initiated NeGP (National e-governance program) and made it mandatory for the state governments to have IT as a major driver of business. Similarly, in recent times, there has been lot of initiatives and policy changes to drive IT projects in government.

However, executing IT projects, forget programs and complex programs, is alien to government kith and kin and is a complete new experience and learning for most of government departments. As a matter of fact, most of the state government units do not have an IT unit and mostly outsource a composite mix of resources, who had quoted the lowest (L1) rate! The government is known for following the right process and not necessarily the right decision and you will find the customer weak in accountability and lacking ownership and decision making skills. If we compare the private sector here, the private sector breeds managers. And the public sector breeds administrators. Managers make decisions that change the way things are. Administrators execute processes defined by others.

With the humungous hierarchical structure, a program which encompasses the entire breadth and depth of a state government is painstakingly challenging. The challenges are manifold and do not limit to a particular customer but extends to some external unknown factors and the entire government machinery.

One of the biggest challenges post the implementation and delivery is User Adoption. The user adoption determines the success of the program and this is a mammoth exercise by itself and cannot be predicted by any standards. The following section describes the challenges in the public sector environment and attempts to describe the environment in which the government projects are executed.

The prime focus of this paper is the execution amidst the challenges as we face in the public sector environment. The execution by itself is an amalgamation of too many finer points as every incremental step is critical for a program success. However, the paper picks 2 fundamental learnings and execution strategies to be adopted in a public sector program execution. The Section III touches on a paradigm shift for the implementation team to perform the customer project manager role. The customer project manager role is a critical function for a mission critical program like ERP which spans across the company. This customer project manager role can make success or failure of the program initiated. And the Section IV talks on the fundamental shift of



executing the project on the blended methodology of PMP and Scrum. The way of working and the culture in government needs to be aligned with our methodology for a successful execution.

1.2 Challenges in the Indian Public Sector

This section will attempt to describe the project environment for executing a government project. The public sector comes with its unique set of myriad challenges.

The first thing you need to understand is that you are operating against an overlapping set of rules, standards, and processes designed to limit the latitude of public sector employees. At heart, those processes are not there to help people get things done but to ensure adherence to a consistent standard of behavior. Projects must operate within these constraints.

1.2.1 Non Accountability

The customer is adhered to the processes being followed and not necessarily exhibit accountability. The customer lacks ownership of the project and therefore, very hard to fix roles and responsibilities on the customer side. With these mega-projects, no one wants to get too close to them in case something bad sticks to them, so they create a process in which the process itself is a decision maker. This is different from the private sector, in which there are clearly identifiable people who have to be responsible for things. In most of the cases, the CEO is the project manager!

1.2.2 Durability of Decision Makers

The top decision makers, i.e., of IAS officer rank are on deputations and change with the political climate. These are among the few people who guide their individual departments to the probable destinations during the program execution. In all probability, they do not stay for the full extended program and depart before the program attains the final delivery. This hamper the most critical part of the program — user adoption as the new in_charge may have complete radical views on the system designed.

1.2.3 IT Awareness

Customer is non IT savvy — The customer is mostly unknown to project methodologies, systems, benefits of IT etc. Users lack basic knowledge and concepts of computer. This becomes quite a hindrance in giving requirements and later accepting the system developed by the project team. The education for IT awareness to be imparted to the users cannot be underestimated in such a scenario.

1.2.4 Vision

Users usually lack the vision of their future system. They are mostly clueless as what they would want from the system. In other words, the essential documents such as project charter which summarizes the need for IT system are missing. The vision is lacking as individuals run the program in times with current political climate, with their individual demands and with their own parochial vision.



1.2.5 Empowerment of Users

Users lack the empowerment and the authority to run the program at the customer level. Mostly it is a top down approach with the CEO / Head leading the way. The grassroots or the transactional mass is mostly left out when the decision making happens. The environment is not consultative or corroborative for user to contribute in terms of their inputs for their successful execution. Sign offs on documents and the overall system delivery suffers, as users are not empowered to take decisions.

1.2.6 Multiple Stakeholder management

You are more apt to run into an overlapping set of stakeholders some of whom you may not even be aware of who may not have direct involvement in a project but can slow down or even stop a project.

Often this happens because their jobs are to manage the process and system of constraints we just talked about. For instance, in one of my programs we had developed e-tendering application but out of blue there was circular from the state government highest authority that you need to adhere to standard rules as approved by state government, which completely hijacked our effort and application. Your job is to make sure you color within the lines.

1.2.7 Political Process

The political process essentially hands you a built-in adversary. The other party is not particularly keen on your success. And while the press plays a valid role, they like to report on failures more than success. It's a more adversarial and complex setup you have more stakeholders but at the same time you have less authority. The other aspect of the political process is budgeting. You cannot legally bind future legislatures fiscally, so there is no guarantee that projects will be fully funded -you're often stuck with reselling and repackaging projects. Legislation can also affect both the deadlines and scope of projects, which can make it difficult for project managers to effectively delineate project scope or timelines. Public sector projects are driven by political cycles and so artificial deadlines are often set. If politicians are driving the project, sometimes for overtly political reasons, it becomes difficult to set the projected benefits and deadlines of the project to benefit the real-world users at the sharp end.

1.2.8 External Factors

External factors such as census information, wage bill commission, and other programs as mandated by central government or external agencies, which require users to perform duty can hamper the delivery schedule. These activities may come as planned as well as unplanned activities.

These are some of the challenges which can leave ever lasting impact on the delivery and the success of the program. The challenges may form just a tip of the iceberg but are notable to understand the project environment. Because these cultural and procedural elements carry a great deal of inertia, it is often necessary to work around them rather than try to change them.



1.3 Performing the Customer Project Manager Role

The challenges if analyzed logically leads to one major lacuna in the whole execution — the customer project manager role is missing! As much as the implementation project manager is critical to the entire execution, the role of the customer project manager is equally important.

The customer project manager is empowered with user side management. You are to account for user expectation management, guiding, hand-holding for key decision making, visualizing the bigger picture, understanding the company dynamics and paving the way for a successfully implementation. Without the customer project manager, the program is at risk of a complete disaster.

The execution success lies in filling the shoes of the customer project manager. The Program Manager has to don multiple hats and the most important one in a public sector is the customer project manager.


The program manager is seen as the public sector companies' trusted advisor where he will advise on anything and everything from CEO's laptop configuration to managing the actual program.

The implementation program manager, hence, has to first understand the public sector company's working. Not only he has to understand the culture and the way of working, he needs to be accepted as one among the equals soon for the project to be successful. For instance, in my experience of state government implementation, we had to adopt certain governmental characteristics, such as long waiting times or attending unplanned meetings running into hours.

Without the formal empowerment by the customer, the program manager has to act as a customer project manager. He needs to understand the process of each individual department and the working of the customer company so that he can collaborate with the user community to move ahead towards the final delivery. For instance, he has to command respect for his position so that key decisions involving cross team collaboration in customer environment can be overruled by the program manager, if necessary.

As a customer project manager, he needs to arrange for logistics for the users and take care of the user needs. He needs to be responsive to the user suggestions and needs and manage user expectations. For instance, the follow-ups required for the feedback on the conference room pilot (CRP) so that schedule is not impacted. The program manager with his team has to triage on the requirements and find acceptance in the solution.

The customer project manager needs to hand hold the user community and paint the bigger picture for all to visualize. He should play an active part in cross team collaboration on the user side and wield an influence to carry out effective decision making. The other thing is to pay a lot of attention to the requirements phase, particularly for IT projects. You need to develop a strict disciplined requirements development process and make sure that it is consistently used. It allows the project manager and business analyst to hide behind the process fighting bureaucracy with bureaucracy.



The customer project manager has to effectively manage the customer vendors including the external and incumbent vendors. The incumbent vendors' liaison is critical for developing the solution on hand and is extremely important the program manager leverages their expertise to successfully orient the program towards a win—win situation. The external vendors for payment gateway vendors, infrastructure services, etc. help in completing the solution and these vendors need to be taken along as part of "one" project team to achieve the final goal of successful delivery.

The last but not the least is the relationship management with the top folks in the public sector organization. The relationship is not only important from an implementation project manager perspective but also from the customer project manager perspective. It is like an insider reporting of the internal situation and helps the customer strategize the way forward.

Essentially the program manager has to perform the 5 step customer project manager requirements.

- ◆ Adapt rather than adopt the government culture and way of working
- ◆ Become the self-nominated CIO of the company, pave way for customer's trusted advisor on each and everything
- ◆ Exert authority as Project manager with Key users, without being empowered by customer.
- ◆ Manage Logistics with internal and external vendors
- ◆ Schedule the commitments from user schedule and manage user expectations.


You need to embrace the project as a community effort and understand that it's not about your ego but all about accomplishing results within the system. It is more than apparent in the government project that the success of the program lies in the success of key individuals and user community as a whole and as a customer project manager, you have to help these folks succeed.

1.4 Blended Methodology

Rather than trying to build the whole thing at once, it's about taking manageable, bite-sized chunks. So, get the early benefits and grow on the back of that. This also makes your project more flexible because you can adapt future requirements as political conditions change.

The customer does not have the patience to wait for longer times and complete the traditional requirement analysis and design and subsequently develop the system. The customer gets frustrated by the denial of the methodology as the methodology and implementation process does not allow a showdown or glimpse of the future system. A common feedback in one of my earliest projects was that the project is not quick in showing the system. A good solution is to show the quick wins or some quick development stunts which can be made live, e.g., customer website, self-service applications. These may be of "Use and Throw" kind but very important to keep one of your KPIs — customer satisfaction - high.

The public sector customer is even more discerning and demanding. The demanding characteristic stems out of their ignorance about the system and the requirements given. The users want to know how the system will look at each possible juncture before they see the final system to use.



The project team needs to adopt "show & tell" methodology. This was the name (Show and Tell) coined by our team so that the customer understand how we are executing the project. The project team needs to invent a new methodology wherein the customer can see what we construct. The customer wants to see, for example, when the project team says the work done is 20% the system has 20% of the features implemented. This is akin to road or house construction where the user can actually see the development work. This is very critical for the project success that the user confidence remains robust and the user is with the project team in the journey towards the final delivery. This will actually help us to build the user confidence and the customer support us in our efforts to make the final Go Live. This will also further help the project and customer team in the ultimate goal of user adoption.

The dire need of the hour was to blend the PMP waterfall model and agile technology. The project had to invent a new model for governing the project and delivering results. Some of the best things of the Scrum methodology are taken up and juxtaposition with the traditional waterfall model.

The Scrum methodology propagates the following key activities:

- ◆ Daily Stand Up meetings
- ◆ Daily work schedule
- ◆ Components for each developer in isolation
- ◆ Scrum master
- ◆ Iterative process of collecting feedback till the development is finalized by the user community


These scrum activities are made into heady cocktail with the waterfall model. The waterfall model has some of its key characteristics:

- ◆ Work Breakdown structure
- ◆ 4 distinct phases of Analysis, Design, Development and Deployment with milestones such as sign offs on Analysis phase, etc.
- ◆ Risk Management
- ◆ Quality Management

This methodology had to be invented in an environment where the development locations were multiple and with different partner teams. So, the mix of agile and waterfall model was topped with a mix of virtual, remote, offshore and onsite teams. The team was split between 4 locations and 5 partners.

The blended methodology had its own impact:

- ◆ The program manager and the project manager team become low on bandwidth. They were overburdened with managing the daily and overall show of the program
- ◆ The iterative process had its own impact on the scope, cost and schedule
- ◆ The integration effort resulted in significant overheads.
- ◆ The partner supervision costs turned out to be higher



The blended methodology believes in the iterative model within each phase of the traditional model. The overall project, while following the basic waterfall model, turns itself inside out by adopting a scrum methodology wherein each individual component (read Work breakdown Structure) actually follows Scrum methodology. This methodology is more result oriented for the discerning customer although resulting in significant overheads on the schedule and cost. However, the project success is determined by a successful delivery, absolute user adoption and high customer satisfaction and that's where the blended methodology scores maximum.

1.5 Conclusion

Executing a Complex program in government space is like taming a wild beast. The public sector is opening with different project opportunities for IT companies and can grow up to 20% of IT revenues in the next 5 years. With a thorough understanding of the challenges and hence, the execution strategies of customer project manager and blended methodology, we considerably reduce the risk of failure and enhance the rate of success.

1.6 Author(s) Profile



Ashish is currently working as a Senior Program Manager in SAS India for strategic key accounts. He possesses around 14 years of IT industry experience in a mix of world renowned brands of MNCs - SAS and Microsoft and our Indian jewels – Infosys and TCS. He has worked extensively in the ERP, CRM and Business Intelligence domain and across almost all major geographies. He believes Indian market offers the best opportunity and currently is based out of Mumbai, India.

He is also a prolific speaker on his experiences and program / project management and been a speaker at PMI and various forums. His other interests include conducting guest lectures at MBA institutes and PMI and being abreast with new ideas. He has leveraged his incubation skills and is Founder and President of MENSA, Hyderabad chapter. He dedicates his Sunday mornings for mentoring and teaching the underprivileged kids.

E-mail: ashish_sadekar@hotmail.com