

project viability assessment

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Scope

Introduction

We delude ourselves if we believe that conventional project management methods are delivering most projects successfully. The current scale of project under-performance and failure is enormous. Over 70% of change projects fail to achieve their goals. A similar situation exists for technology projects.

If projects under-perform or fail, what action do we take? For many, the conventional wisdom is to work harder, to try and get the project back on track. But this approach isn't always the best option.

Indeed, innovative, entrepreneurial businesses accept that not all projects bear fruit – innovative ideas don't guarantee success. They take the view that 'pressing on regardless' to complete a project, doesn't deliver value to anybody, and worse, might damage the business and its people.

Whilst there is little doubt that successful projects contribute to successful business, it is also true that the way project underperformance is handled plays a pivotal role in building business value.

This paper examines the options available for projects that are underperforming or showing signs of failure, and where the possibility of straightforward recovery seems unlikely. The key lesson is that business and organisations are judged more frequently by their failures, than by their successes. Learning how to provide 'soft landings' for non-viable projects is a vital component in managing a successful enterprise.

The Authors

The Authors and their work

Over the last decade Richard Byford and Kevin Potts have worked on parallel paths in their approach to project management and managing complexity. Their ideas have been stimulated by the recognition that over the last decade, project management methods have not always kept pace with changes in the business environment. After some collaborative research, they have developed a new project management capability to meet the demands of rapid change.

This new capability is based on an integrated set of structured reviews – examining the human side of the project and how this interacts with project goals and processes. The method captures project behaviours and conditions, separating symptoms from causes. The analysis of the resulting data forms a comprehensive and robust benchmark of hard and soft project dynamics – enabling management to make informed and balanced decisions. The method can be used as a management system – a way of managing complex problems. With appropriate training and re-enforcement, the system becomes an powerful way of thinking.

Richard Byford has a wide experience of project management, which started in the heavy industry sectors of petrochemicals and naval engineering and R&D. When computers made their debut in design and office automation, his interest moved to computing, software engineering and business management. He gained his MBA whilst setting up his own company and becoming a front-runner in software training.

Kevin Potts is a widely experienced systems engineer and project manager. His work spans international, public and private sector projects – mainly in the defence, aerospace and communications industries. After taking a leading role in the successful delivery of the UK's air Traffic Control project, he set up his own business delivering people-centred project management solutions.

Why Projects Lose Value

Projects can lose value for a number of reasons:

- The costs escalate and outweigh the benefits.
- The delivery is delayed beyond the point where it has sufficient benefits.
- The market moves to new products or services, making the project obsolete.
- The business strategy changes direction, making the project less relevant.
- The project cannot deliver the benefits originally expected, making the payoff marginal.

There may be other, less obvious reasons why a project's value could come into question:

- The business is unable to adequately resource all the projects in its current portfolio.
- The project is reliant on a technology or capability which may not materialise.
- There is internal competition for limited resources that are locked up in the project.
- As the project unfolds, the risk/return ration begins to look worse than expected.
- There is doubt about the true cost and measures of progress.
- The project team can't cope with the constant changes to scope or requirements.
- There is lack of confidence about the 'fitness for purpose' of the final deliverables.

One thing is certain. A project can change at any time during its life, moving gradually or swiftly towards non-viability. You should assess a project's viability at the earliest sign of significant changes to markets, business strategy or project costs.

Before we consider the implications of project viability, lets first look at some typical examples of some that would make good candidates for assessment:

Examples

Plans for a new customer call centre were well in hand. The project was being managed in an exemplary fashion and promised to be operational months ahead of schedule and at a lower cost than was envisaged. Meanwhile, changes in the market meant that a greater amount of business than expected would be carried out via the Internet, and the original reasons for needing a call centre were diminishing.

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A much-needed new corporate head office in the midlands was already over budget but still far from complete. The building shell had been finished and the internal 'fitting out' had just started. With only five months before the proposed move date, the project manager still insisted that the date could be met - if everything went well. Meanwhile, plans went ahead for a very high profile opening on the appointed date. Concerns were increasingly expressed that the building might be what the business needed two years previously when it was first planned, but would not meet the current requirements. Indeed, nobody was sure if the requirements were really understood in the first place.

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With £4m spent, and another £2.5 million to go, nobody was prepared to tell the CEO that his pet project - for a bespoke eCommerce system - could now be bought virtually off-the-shelf for well under half a million. Some of the company's best people - assigned to the project because of its importance - covertly looked for another job.

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A company was well advanced in their plan to launch an innovative new service to existing clients but the technology was insufficiently advanced to cope with the likely demand, despite public promises being made. The company was unlikely to be able to come up with an appropriate solution in time because the best people were working on the Chairman's 'pet' eCommerce project.

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When the new management team joined an organisation two years ago, one of the first things they started was a culture change project to make the company focus more closely on processes that serve the customer better. After early 'wins' in the first few months, new initiatives were met with a level of cynicism that seemed to increase with every step. They wondered if the project could ever meet their original goals, but reluctant to lose face, they started to look for those responsible for thwarting their efforts.

The viability of all these projects needed to be assessed urgently. But traditional project methods treat project viability as an early 'gate' that once passed, is rarely examined again. Our examples were all cases where the management decided to press on with the project, in spite of obvious symptoms of significant problems. None delivered satisfactory results. Some were ultimately declared redundant, and some were conveniently swept under the corporate

carpet. All of them were allowed to continue against the key points of their original goals, which they subsequently failed to meet. In most of the examples, the cause of failure or under-performance was attributed to the project manager or the project team. In every case, when the mud started to fly, some of it ended up sticking to the main supplier or service provider.

Were these examples of project failures really the project team's fault? Was the supplier actually the main cause of the problem? Were the problems created in the boardroom? Our research indicates that the answers are less clear cut than you might imagine...

People

Good people find themselves working on failing projects

We asked a sample of eighty project managers and people responsible for major projects what sort of personality types they thought would be useful on a project team. Dynamic, resourceful, helpful, tenacious, hardworking, optimistic were all popular replies.

Then we looked at a range of projects that either failed conspicuously or ran into difficulties. We were surprised to find that some of the very qualities cited as being essential in project workers were often the ones that seeded the problems:

Dynamic:	Get too many things started at once
Resourceful:	Choose a solution even before the problem is fully understood.
Helpful:	Go out of their way to satisfy all other stakeholders
Tenacious:	Keep on doing things even when they don't yield results
Hardworking:	Will burn out rather than ask for help
Optimistic:	Always the bearers of good news (even when it isn't...)

When the going gets tough, the tough get going; and their only way forward is to work harder at whatever they do that brings them success in less difficult circumstances. As you can see from above, this intuitive response isn't always smart!

No matter how hard the project team works, they can only change things that are within their sphere of influence. When the cause of the problem is external to the project, more effort is not a viable solution – in fact it can sometimes make things worse.

Conventional approaches to project management

Once a project has been assessed as feasible and early market testing or prototypes confirm initial business assumptions, a management mindset prevails. ‘There’s no turning back, now!’ The project’s approval loads the responsibility onto the project manager. If things go wrong, his or her management skills may be questioned. When a project starts to come unstuck, conventional project wisdom encourages project teams to do things like:

- Clamp down on change.
- Micro-manage resources.
- Report progress at smaller intervals.
- Tighten commercial relationships.
- Emphasise key dates.
- Quote the contract and specification.

It isn’t considered smart to question if there should be a major change of direction – this would be moving the goalposts – not something that project managers are encouraged to do. Project cancellation is a signal that the project sponsors and the project team have failed. Is it any wonder that they persist in a state of denial until action is forced upon them? But major changes in project direction or even cancellation, must be determined by considering the value delivered to the business. We operate in an environment where goal posts are not only expected to move – they are frequently motorised! Markets can move devastatingly quickly, or take much longer to materialise than expected. Either way it’s easy to find your project out of step with the changing needs. Major culture change programmes, infrastructure investment and complex technology development take years to complete, by which time the market or business need may well have moved or evaporated.

If business needs or markets have changed significantly and the project is in doubt, then putting additional effort into getting the project complete ‘on time, to cost and to spec’, will only result in the production of quality scrap!

The consequences of inadequate data

In practice, continuing with a project that has little value, or cancelling one that has the potential to be recovered, can have a dramatically negative impact on the business. These can include:

- Top managers appearing out of touch with reality.
- Project Managers losing credibility with their teams.
- Customers rejecting valueless deliverables, or being frustrated by poor decision-making.
- Staff becoming de-motivated because they believe their efforts are futile.
- Good people deciding to leave for more rewarding projects.
- Shareholders concluding their money is being thrown down the drain.

Many top management teams find themselves without the right information to make good decisions. Assessing a project's viability and deciding its fate with 'hard' business and 'soft' people consequences is difficult. If top management don't have the right data to make decisions, it is not unreasonable for them to wait until they have, but the wait can often be a long one, giving the impression that management are dithering over a project's future. This delay can fuel speculation and force the project team to continue in the spotlight of shareholder and customer derision. Indecision causes projects that could be put back on track, to lose credibility – delay and uncertainty prevents the project team from taking effective recovery action, or takes them past the point where the project could be cancelled without damage. Waiting for better data on a project which is already dead in the water, simply throws away valuable business resources.

If delay and indecision are damaging when considering strategic redirection or cancellation, then rushing into decisions in a 'data-free' environment jeopardises the possibility of bringing a project to its best conclusion. There is plenty of evidence to show that that viability decisions made in haste and with insufficient data, results in projects being re-launched with the same amount of over-optimism that caused the project difficulties in the first place.

To make sound decisions, management needs to have clear information. Complex projects are usually enveloped in a vast amount of data. All too often project auditors try to simplify the state of the

project by focusing on 'the usual suspects': requirements clarity, resource budgeting and control, scheduling accuracy, change and risk management etc. This can lead to conclusions being drawn that the project success hinges on a few key issues. It therefore comes as a bitter disappointment when, having resolved those issues, the project is still bogged down by confusion and lack of progress. It should come as no surprise that complex projects are besieged by complex problems. Over-simplification of these problems can lead to a loss of important information and the integrity of your decisions will therefore be compromised.

It's obvious that the earlier you detect weaknesses in a project, the better. Your processes should be geared to detect the need for strategic redirection or termination, rather than focussing on project success alone. Because conventional project methods do not recognise the need to assess project viability after initial approval has been given, they do not yield the necessary data for strategic redirection or closedown. This feature is compounded by the completion-oriented business culture, which makes it difficult for people to contemplate a change of plan without feeling they are jeopardising their own futures or 'letting the team down.'

By recognising the information you need for a viability assessment and planning for its swift retrieval, you can dramatically reduce decision-making time. Conducting viability assessments using independent assessors ensures that bias is accounted for, and fears of partisan assessment are eliminated, helping those participating in the assessment to be more open. Major procurement organisations, businesses and academic researchers; all advocate the benefit of external independent assessment.

Can success spring from failure?

Is the decision to abandon a project a management failure? There can be many benefits associated with a well-managed project close-down. Amongst these benefits are:

- Your staff are quickly re-deployed to more valuable work.
- Your project managers gain a reputation for being able to spot insurmountable difficulties and having the courage to recommend closure.
- Your shareholders will spot the signs of strong top management who focus shareholders' money on success.
- Your customers (ultimately) recognise your integrity and share the benefits of having freed capital and human resources to work on more successful ventures.
- You profit from being open and honest by understanding the real sources of difficulties, learning lessons for the future.
- Other projects may benefit by having budget transferred to them that was previously earmarked for non-viable or lower value projects.

Project cancellation isn't the only option. A strategic change of direction sometimes allows parts of the project to be continued or be used elsewhere.

In fact, it is unusual to find that the only option is project close-down. Standing back from the detail of the project and viewing the 'big picture,' usually brings a recognition that elements of the project retain value. Skilful unstitching of the remainder brings a renewed energy and enthusiasm from those charged with meeting its goals.

How to do it

If sound decisions are to be made, then what's needed is a method that allows project managers and principal stakeholders to evaluate the full costs and implications of all their options – recovery, cancellation, or strategically changing the project. We have argued that conventional project methods do not collect the necessary data to make this assessment. So how *should* you go about collecting the data, and what data is needed?

Before you Start...

In our opinion, the first step in the assessment process is to attempt to establish a 'no blame' attitude. This might be difficult, especially if relationships are suffering because of the state of the project, but if you bypass this step, then the data that you'll receive for assessment will be significantly biased and lead you to inaccurate conclusions.

This 'no blame' ground rule has to be shared by all the principal stakeholders, not just the project team. The data required to make a comprehensive viability assessment needs to come from customers, users, regulators, suppliers and investors.

Dealing with people closely involved in the project must be done sensitively when assessing viability: Let's suppose that you are the one who has dedicated blood, sweat and tears to the project. Maybe you have persuaded colleagues – or been persuaded – to give up spare time and energy to meet deadlines. You may feel emotionally involved in the project to the extent that it has become as much a part of your life as your family.

So how would you feel if somebody came to you and started talking about 'seeing if the project is worth finishing?'

Often it will be the project staff who are the most reluctant to seriously consider a strategic change or cancellation. As we noted earlier, conventional wisdom tends to class this sort of action as failure – who needs that on their CV?

On the other hand, it may well be that the people closest to the work have already realised that the project is not viable – perhaps for technical reasons – and be concerned about their own credibility. Some of them may have already been on the lookout for another challenge with a different employer – taking their hard-won and valuable experience with them.

As you can see, the information you get will usually be biased. Understanding this from the start of the assessment will help you calibrate the information you collect. Making it clear that the assessment is not a witch-hunt, will help people contribute more constructively and effectively.

Having clarified the ground rule about 'no blame' and made a preliminary judgement about various stakeholders' attitudes, you are now ready to focus on the practicalities of the assessment.

Stages of analysis

Complex decisions would be straightforward if the data about a situation could be reduced to a few simple facts. In reality, the amount of complex information required is likely to be compounded by a multitude of options for action and contingent outcomes. We have already spoken about the danger of oversimplification; however, it is possible to ease the task of analysis without losing essential detail.

Our approach is to analyse the various ‘threads,’ which contribute to a project’s viability before finally considering them all together. These are:

The Strategic Foundation – how closely the project fits the current strategic needs of the organisation.

Likely Outcomes – the revised projected cost of the project, when it is likely to start to deliver benefits and the likelihood of it delivering the benefits that the organisation’s strategy demands.

The Organisational Capability – whether the organisation and main suppliers/service providers have the capability to complete the project.

The relevance of each of these sections will vary from project to project: For example, if the role of your organisation is that of a supplier, the strategic foundation of the project is of more relevance to your customer than yourself.

Strategic Foundation

This explores the strategic rationale on which the project is based, including the assumptions, predictions and original risk tolerance of the project sponsors. Not only might past conditions have undermined the foundation of the project; all assumptions and predictions need to be examined for their future effect.

Look for:

- Clear links to the current strategy of the company.
Do project and business goals align? The pace of change in business is quickening, so the probability of business strategy changing during the course of a long project is now greater than it has ever been. The benefit-payoff of projects therefore needs to be tested more frequently than in the past. Many

organisations only do an in-depth analysis of payoff for the initial business case. Their next serious look at benefits occurs just prior to hand-over to the operators – or just before new skills/services are launched. Too late! When assessing project viability, you need to be clear about the projects contribution to your business or organisation's goals. They may no longer be as relevant as they were when the project started. This needs careful analysis.

- Assumptions that have not been updated.
Not all assumptions are obvious. Even fewer will have been discussed or written into the business case.
- Predictions about the state of the market/operating environment.
Does the market/customer still need the project? Could changes to the operational environment be satisfied by more up-to-date products/services?
- Risk environment.
The risk tolerance of the organisation may have changed since the project was initiated, making it less attractive.
- Clarity of Objectives.
All projects should have a pantomime season. It should be at the stage where requirements are first defined. "Oh yes it should, Oh no it shouldn't!" There is no end of fun in clarifying requirements between stakeholders at the start of a project... Sometimes, the requirements process isn't as good as it should have been, and requirements remain ambiguous until later in the project.

When this happens, stakeholders need to be clear about how their intended project benefits will be measured. This process usually injects greater objectivity into the debate. But it is not always possible to have completely objective measurements and some, by their nature, will be more subjective. But even subjective measurement is better than none at all. Stakeholders must completely agree clear and measurable objectives before any determination can be made about the viability of the project.
- Stakeholder Goal Conflict.
A sure sign of a terminally ill project is when the key stakeholders cannot agree its objectives. So if you are experiencing difficulty in agreeing measurable goals, take a step backwards and try to see the bigger picture. Is it possible to develop enough common ground for project stakeholders to feel that the project has value? It is no use trying to complete a project if the key players' objectives don't align and they will not or cannot compromise.

Watch items:

- Members of the team (at the level where the project was sanctioned) may have emotional attachments to the project or perceive changes to plan as a 'failure'.
- There may be a reluctance to accept that early assumptions were inaccurate.
- Original goals may have been obscured by later events or requirements 'creep'.
- There may have been changes in the team, which makes access to the original strategy, rationale or assumptions difficult.
- Answering questions like "how did we get into this mess" is only useful in post-project appraisals, but in the middle of a project, witch-hunts are unproductive – they just eat resources and valuable time.
- Some people will find it difficult to not attach political and emotional spin when providing data.
- Estimates of future performance may be over-optimistic – 'If everything goes well...'
- Future changes to the organisation's risk tolerance may affect the attractiveness of the project.

Likely Outcomes

This area of enquiry involves collecting data to support an estimate of the final costs, delivery or commissioning dates and integration costs of the completed projects.

Against these estimates, there is the important question of how closely 'what is being created' matches 'what is needed'. Will the final deliverables meet the needs of the organisation on the day they are delivered? Or will they only reflect the past needs of the organisation when the project was initiated? *Or worse still, will they be what the project team thought the organisation needed when they started?*

The aim here is to collect sufficient data to be able to 'paint a picture' of the completed project – complete with price tag, delivery date and anticipated users' response to the deliverables.

Look for:

- Estimates for all remaining work and contingencies.
The data is unlikely to be exact and must be considered against the track record of their source.
- Gaps in the scope of the project, such as integration costs, training costs etc.
- Stakeholders' concerns being ignored.

Indicators of good quality of data in this area are:

- Sound planning and resource management tools.
- Progressive reduction in ambiguity.

- Clear work breakdown and responsibility structure.
- Use of metrics.
- Measurement validation.
- Information management.

Use a range of methods to gain a workable description of the project deliverables. Compare the output of the different methods – and talk to samples of all stakeholder groups. Consistency between the output of the methods and consistency between different sources will indicate mature requirements, change and expectations management processes.

- Up to date market testing or prototyping/modelling incorporating any important customer/user changes.
- As well as problems integrating the project deliverables into the user environment, there is a risk that the new configuration may create unforeseen side effects.

Watch Items:

- Mismatches between schedule and cost estimates.
- Beware optimism from sources that have previously given consistently underestimated assessments.
- Lack of accounting for ‘lag’ between the cost of progress and the declared progress measures.
- Beware of unsubstantiated ‘good news’.
- ‘Facts’ that turn out to be speculation or ‘wishful thinking’.
- Projects can look perfect until exposed to real users/customers: assign value to functionality according to *users* comments – not the builders’.
- Functions or tasks that are not tied to the project’s objectives.

Organisational Capability

The previous section considered the likely cost, schedule and deliverables. This section is about the organisation’s capability to deliver the project and their consequential risks. It focuses on people and the tools and methods they use.

Look for:

- Stakeholders.

In addition to the basic identification of goal-conflict, a key determinant of project viability is the degree of cohesion within the principal stakeholder group. Remarkably, some projects fail to acknowledge just how important it is to have good rapport between their stakeholders – some even lose sight of who their principal stakeholders are!

Measuring stakeholder cohesion can be difficult and trust has to be high on the agenda before people feel able to be open and honest about things. So if trust is lacking, don't expect your stakeholder responses to be accurate overnight! You may have to make an allowance in the assessment.

- Who are principal stakeholders?
- To what extent are they being open and honest about their view of the project?
- The degree to which stakeholder relationships are contributing to the state of the project.

■ Track Record.

Part of what conditions the future, is the past. Thoroughly review the track record of every influential person and group in the project. What does it tell you? Have they managed this sort of project before? Was it successful – who says so? Were previous projects the same size and complexity? Much of this data should already have been assessed before embarking on the project. But as projects progress, the goals, scale and complexity often change and grow, so original track record assessments may not be valid, when reviewed against current circumstances.

■ Capability.

Even if the project goals have not varied, your assessment of capability of some of the project's key people and stakeholders may well have changed. That's why it is important to re-establish an assessment of current ability and potential. You cannot have a viable project if key players are never going to be up to the challenge – even if you have a long association with them. One of the toughest aspects of assessing viability is being honest and objective about capability.

■ Process Management.

There are many processes needed for comprehensive and rigorous project management. For project viability assessment, two processes stand out as being pivotal to understanding future options and past decisions.

• Risk Assessment.

It is sometimes said that risk, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Check that your internal risk assessments have not become blind to the changes in the external world. Also verify that the quality of the risk assessment is up to the job. This demands that the assessors really do have a broad view of the project and a deep understanding of its complexity. Don't let the data-rich, routine output of 'sophisticated' tools substitute purposeful inquiry and intelligent analysis.

• Change Management.

If not adequately controlled, change management can become a mere gate guardian with the motto "none shall pass." This may look good when viewed statistically, as conventional wisdom encourages us to think that no change

equates to sound project management. But many project managers have learned (late in the project) that the change management gate guardians were ignoring or resisting change vital for success. Check the quality of change management analysis and length of time it takes for decision-making.

Other capabilities and processes to be examined in detail:

- Requirements management.
- Assumptions analysis and monitoring.
- Expectations management.
- Technology assessment and evaluation.
- Project control systems.
- Conflict resolution processes and management style.
- Reward and motivational systems.
- Knowledge management.
- Stakeholder management.
- Testing and acceptance planning.

Watch Items

If there is any suggestion (or even fear) that a project may need to be axed, viability assessment must:

- Be swift and discreet.
- Have due regard to the feelings, fears and dignity of the incumbent team.
- Only collect data that is relevant to the task in hand. It is easy to be overloaded with interesting data but be without a scrap of information.

Be sensitive:

- People may confuse 'lack of competence' with 'incompetence' and be unnecessarily defensive.

Analysis

Structuring the process

There is a lot to be said for separating the activities of data collection from the analysis. This will not always be possible and will usually require a certain amount of iteration. Either way, it is essential to structure your process so that you don't jump to an early decision then proceed to reject data if it does not support your predudice.

The best decision will be a combination of analysis and intuition. Be sure you give them both a chance!

Constraints on Action

Our previous chapter described the sort of data needed to assess the status and value of the project. In an ideal world nothing further would be required before a decision could be made. In reality, there will usually be implications to be considered before you can take action:

- **Image.**

This aspect of project viability appears at the top of the list, not because it is the most important, but because its importance is often underestimated. Adverse marketplace image can be incredibly destructive, regardless of the effort put into salvaging other aspects of the project. Observers of the Millennium Dome will have witnessed just how difficult it can be to recover from an image tailspin. When you make your assessment, don't forget your long-term image. You can be forgiven for closing down a project if you do it in a timely and managed way. Dithering over mounting losses and reducing credibility brings another result!
- **Stakeholder Pressures.**

Stakeholder willingness and cohesion can have a major effect on the practicalities of implementing changes. Consider who benefits with redirection/cancellation/recovery. Pragmatism may sometimes need to over-ride your best intentions!
- **Risk and costs (financial and political) of litigation and/or settlements.**
- **Effects on team – financial, emotional, morale, human potential, redeployment.**
- **Funding for future projects.**

- Ethical issues.
- Managers' careers.
- Value of managers' stakes in the organisation.
- What the potential action will signal to the workforce.
- Opportunity to re-baseline the project and re-define success criteria.
- Long term supplier relationships.
- Opportunities presented by recognising capability deficiencies.
- Actions of competitors and market dynamics.
- Management learning.
- Organisational learning.
- Building intellectual capital.
- Future flexibility on this and other projects.
- Opportunities arising through redirection.

The Decision- making Process

If the forum for reviewing a project includes members who have previously had responsibility for sanctioning or controlling it, it is important to have a strong chairman or facilitator who has total independence. The authors of this paper are available for this role and are both experts at process facilitation in senior management teams.

The final decision may be a straightforward case of whether to continue/recover a project or to axe it. There will usually be other options: in many instances these will be more practical options in the light of external constraints:

- Change the delivery pattern: Reduce the initial functionality and *progressively* add functions back by refining working prototypes.
- Modularise the *viable* deliverables and monitor them as re-baselined sub-projects.
- Outsource selected sub-systems or change the technology platform or method upon which they are based.
- Re-phase the project.
- Link the project to a broader programme.

Summary and conclusions

This paper has covered many of the key issues in conducting a project viability assessment. Of course, no two projects are alike, so these guidelines need to be tailored to deal with the specific circumstances of the project and its environment. The following list is a quick reminder of some of the more important points we have covered:

- Before you start, create a no-blame attitude.
- The value of a project can become marginalised for many reasons. Managers should regard this as a fact of life.
- Reduced project viability or value is not necessarily caused by bad management.
- Witch-hunting and looking for individuals to blame are counter-productive and will obscure the true status of a project.
- If you could strip away the political and emotional issues from underperformance, objective assessment would be easy...
- Conventional approaches to project management are inadequate because they only focus on planned completion – ‘work harder’ and ‘press on regardless’.
- Keep the assessment short, sharp and as discrete as possible. A project team *will* be affected by any review – try to mitigate the effects by sensitivity and a disciplined approach to your enquiry methods.
- If handled well, even project cancellation can be seen as a positive move.
- Collect data first – analyse, and decide, later.
- Know what you intend to do with data before you collect it.
- Consider the source and reliability of data before you decide what it is telling you.
- Be objective – use qualified outsiders to do the investigation and guide you through the process.

Many top managers with responsibility for projects have concluded that an independent view is vital when conducting critical assessments. Central Government in the UK is making this aspect

mandatory for large capital investment projects and many business leaders have come to the same conclusion – independent assessment is not an option – it's essential.