

The key project players

Four specific individuals or groups of people must be committed to an IT project if it is to succeed, says the study report from the BCS and the Royal Academy of Engineering

SENIOR MANAGERS must give leadership to IT projects – and pay proper attention to developing some key IT people who are in short supply. This emerges from the study by the BCS and the Royal Academy of Engineering, which puts new emphasis on the role of the systems architect.

Senior managers need to take the essential roles of sponsor and business customer in complex IT projects, the study report says.

‘The business customer has deep knowledge of the process, and is also the developer and custodian of the requirements.

‘The senior sponsor is responsible for ensuring that the project has clear high-level deliverables that relate to the overall business strategy.’

It is equally important to ensure that the users of the IT system participate in its specification and development, the report says.

Front-line users are most likely to know the procedures in current use, so their cooperation is vital to ensure that the designers get correct information. Secondly, it is important for users to feel a sense of ownership of the project so they do not feel the package is imposed on them.

The report is emphatic about the importance of systems architects. The systems architect produces an overview of the technical

structure but free from implementation details – and this role is ‘pivotal’.

Evidence suggests that these people can hold the key to success in a complex IT project – but they are in very short supply.

‘The role, which is increasingly widely recognised, has been forced on projects by the sheer breadth of hardware, software and communications options now available. Only a truly experienced and knowledgeable person can

harmonise the selections into an effective whole.

‘Experienced architects should be able to incorporate sufficient flexibility to accommodate the changes in specification that generally arise during projects without introducing unnecessary complexity which could compromise the integrity of the design.’

Ideally the scope for evolution should extend beyond the project to encompass future projects or products.

The report continues, ‘Systems architects have the exceptional conceptual skills required to translate a business vision into a technical blueprint.

‘Moreover, they must have the breadth of human and organisational understanding to address the underlying organisational and motivational issues that can critically affect project success.’

The project manager has overall responsibility for the project. This includes meeting the agreed budget and timescale and overseeing delivery of the specifications, testing and handover to the customer.

‘There is a tendency for technical experts to be shifted into project management, despite the fact that it requires distinct skills.’

‘Successful project managers typically have many years’ experience,’ the report says. ‘Project management requires a broad skill set that includes leadership qualities, commercial awareness, willingness to take calculated risks, integrity, communication, persuasion and negotiating skills and problem solving ability. IT project managers also require sufficient understanding of the technology to identify potential difficulties and to gain the respect of their team.’

The report calls for better preparation of project managers: ‘There is a tendency for technical experts to be shifted into project management, despite the fact that it requires distinct skills.

‘Regrettably, many organisations also lack well defined career paths for project managers and fail to provide adequate opportunities for professional development.’

‘Organisations need to realise the enormous gains to be made from developing their project management capacity.’

