

## ***Estimating - Delivering the Impossible is, ahem, still impossible***

The UK Government's National Audit Office recently reported that the new Immigration Casework System development project was 6 months overdue and £385m overspent.

I'm not entirely surprised. In a past life one of my team was involved in bidding for a very similar project. The estimating approach was to size the requirement, consider the timescales for delivery, examine the proposed technical solution and then run it through a standard estimating application. The tool said, "This can't be done. It is an impossible project." The client was told and an amended timescale was suggested.

The response – "Don't be ridiculous, we don't trust tools they're too mechanistic, and we'll throw bodies at it so we can deliver on time." Suffice it to say our company didn't win the contract. As predicted by the tool, the project failed, but the schadenfreude associated with knowing we were right doesn't help the taxpayer.

Cast your mind back to the UK debacle that was New Tax Credits and to the Child Support Agency system. The first failed because of impossible deadlines the second because of unregulated change, and the project below for both reasons.

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An Eastern European country wanted to have it's entire treasury system re-built. The programme was let and when it was finally canned the

requirement had grown from less than 10,000 Function Points to more than 30,000 Function points and was still growing with no end in sight.

So why is this so common, and who is to blame?

Firstly, I think the politicians have no knowledge of the time it takes to implement large computer systems successfully. They make promises to become elected and then press Civil Servants to deliver. There is no dialogue. There is a need for Ministers to ask the question, "When can this be delivered?" Instead we have, "I want this and I want it now."

Secondly, Senior Civil Servants are unwilling to tell a Minister that he or she is asking for the impossible (they want to keep their job). This attitude goes all the way down the ranks. The hierarchical nature of the Civil Service means that, in order to climb the greasy pole, each successive layer will avoid reality and pass the buck of failure to the next person in the line. If you're clever, you award the contract and then get the hell out of there into another (ideally promoted) post before the project fails. The buck eventually stops with the supplier.

Thirdly, there's the industry. Big government contracts are hard to win but can be worth a huge amount of money. Techies come up with solutions and don't like being told they are being optimistic on cost, effort and timescale. Sales people look to the main chance – commission can be huge for these contracts – so they tend to ignore the little difficulties associated with being asked to do the impossible. Industry has a vested interest in saying "Yes" to Government even when the requirement is undeliverable.

So will it ever end?

Here's a recipe that might work:

**Politicians:**

- be realistic about what you ask for in a short timescale
- understand what the end state will look like
- ask for an informed opinion on probability of delivery

**Civil Servants**

- assess the request
- determine if it can be delivered
- have the guts to say that it can't be done.

**Industry**

- use metrics and tools to assess requests
- stop promising to deliver the undeliverable.

**Everyone.**

Most of all get your estimating right

- know what you want to deliver
- estimate based on parametric models
- accept that timescales may be too optimistic
- manage change and re-estimate regularly

So the means to 'do it better' exist. The question remains whether there is a collective will to use the methods and experience we have to achieve better results.

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