

Dealing With The Unmentionables: The Amido Consultant's Trickiest Task

BY STEPHEN ARNOLD

Whatever the size of the project, when Amido take on an engagement, it's more than just the technical development and the implementation of new capabilities that we hold in focus.

Invariably when we engage on-site with a client, we are part of a larger puzzle; rarely is a deliverable stand-alone that can be designed, built and launched completely autonomously. Rather we find we are delivering part of a complex system, alongside other suppliers or customer function responsible for other parts of the system or business processes that are collectively being delivered as part of a multi-stream programme. Whether we are leading a standalone delivery in partnership with the client or playing our part in a wider multi-supplier programme of change, we are always looking beyond our remit for the hidden risks, and the inherent challenges in the running and co-ordination of complex project programmes. These often unstated or hidden challenges can have some of the biggest impacts on a project's success.

Such challenges include, skills gaps, lack of leadership or empowerment (at a team or individual level), inappropriate or competing delivery methods or frameworks – the list goes on.

Anyone experienced in development and change management understands the core management roles required to deliver a project: delivery, design and development, communications, testing and implementation. But sometimes it is the most important, awkward, risk-heavy tasks that can remain unmentioned, unassigned and unacknowledged.

Where business change leads may be busy defining the organisation's ability to receive the change, more often than not there are a pile of unmentioned challenges that need to be surfaced and managed to smooth a deliverable's path to launch.

The Hidden Challenges

Client Skills Gaps – As delivery leads, we are close to the action; whether sitting business SMEs alongside analysts and developers or engaging with the wider project stakeholders through the governance frameworks, we can quickly see where skills gaps or project organization challenges lie.

And it's not only at the coalface, but higher up the chain that a lack of knowledge of technology, or an organisation's experience of a methodology, can slow or even halt progress altogether.

A question we invariably ask at the start of an engagement is, how agile can we be given the constraints of the project, programme and the level of agile knowledge and experience within the target organisation. This is probably one of the biggest challenges for us as a third party and requires careful handling.

Third Party Issues – No client wants to see tensions or non-productive disagreements between the suppliers they've engaged. Collaboration is key, without a doubt, but responsibility gaps, skills gaps or lack of the requisite experience demanded of a supplier can surface in multi-stream, multi-supplier programmes. Equally, remit crossovers or wrong assumptions for who is responsible for otherwise non-assigned aspects of a programme or system can present challenges that need to be acknowledged, require careful handling, and if left unchecked can put at risk delivery resulting in a commercial impact.

(Non-partisan) Politics – The most subtle to spot, and one of the hardest (impossible?) to tackle head on, can also be the most poisonous of all issues that a project might face - politics.

It's a fact of life that the most ambitious, upwardly-mobile individuals will – at some point – look to improve their status within an organisation. And all power to them. But when an individual's own interests or behaviour starts to impact project success, it's our place to spot it and plan a course of action to mitigate the risk it presents.

Navigating A Path

As a consultant frequently working in the role of delivery manager, I find myself perfectly placed to observe and head off the hidden challenges of big project delivery.

There are five principles that I apply to every engagement, to manage around my core deliverables, surface the hidden challenges, and de-risk our path in order to deliver a successful, timely and on-budget project.

1. Be transparent – Surface risks, issues and the facts on the ground without bias, and using the appropriate governance ensure there is ownership of issues and facilitate decision making.

2. Demonstrate control – A key principle, when implementing a complex system in a complex organisation, is to assess every activity, and look beyond our defined remit. Taking control where there is none, and ensuring there is appropriate ownership tasks, risks and issues.

3. Work collaboratively – To use communication, being open with partners and other suppliers to share responsibility and engender a positive, happy and productive team.

4. Empower – Our aim is to lead from the back seat, supporting our clients to make decisions and drive their own projects, enabling them to better accept the change, and facilitate greater understanding in future projects.

And finally,

5. Professionalism – To remain professional in every beat of the engagement, remain impartial but sensitive to the backdrop of complex politics, and always put project success and the people responsible for delivering it first.

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