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Top tips for successful change programmes

Both public and private sector organisations face the challenge of delivering high quality change programmes that realise expected business benefits whilst keeping costs down.

An effective technology solution which underpins the new processes, used by a fully engaged workforce, characterises a successful business change programme. Capita has worked on many such change programmes over the years and has compiled a series of top tips to help you to ensure your change programme ticks all the right boxes.

1. Start right

It is human nature to want to start any programme quickly but investing time at the beginning will pay dividends further down the track by ensuring there is appropriate business engagement and clarity from the start.

Businesses should resist the desire to create an early illusion of progress. Organisations often work hard to engage teams in a rush to start systems coding in order to demonstrate tangible progress. More often than not this is a mistake: successful projects invest time up front in order to get the requirements and design properly articulated.

Another common mistake is to forget that the technical or non-functional requirements also need to be clear from the beginning. How and when a system is going to be used will impact on service levels. For example, a billing system will get hit very hard by lots of people at certain times of the month so needs to be able to cope at peak times. Patterns of use clearly have performance implications.

It is essential to be realistic about what you can achieve and focus on the essential outcomes. This will mean clearly defining your highest priority objectives or constraints so these can be managed effectively to achieve the best possible outcomes.

2. People

Lack of engagement breeds fear and uncertainty, so right from the beginning of any programme it is vital to engage with users of the system you are implementing. This will make staff more open to change and less fearful. If they aren't on board with the change programme then the systems implementation and realisation of benefits will be far tougher.

It may sound obvious, but don't leave progress to chance. Make sure that people are not working in disconnected silos and that responsibilities and accountability is clear. Lines of communication must be open between all the different elements of the change programme and get any 'bad news' out early but keep it factual. One large scale internet project went totally off the rails last year because the designers went off in one direction and the infrastructure engineers in another and no one was taking overall responsibility. They ended up wasting huge sums of money undoing work and incurring damaging project delays in the process.

3. Plan for the worst case scenario

Organisations should plan for things to go wrong in any change programme because no programme will ever go exactly to plan. Worst case scenario planning is particularly important for large change programmes where the organisation has little or no experience of having done something similar before.

By researching and acknowledging risks – both internal and external – and putting in place a remedial plan, the project team is effectively providing invaluable insurance for the project. Identify, analyse, mitigate, manage is the normal lifecycle.

Risk management must be a living element of the programme not just a box ticking exercise. In the end this will be what helps you get a programme back on track if a problem arises. It should be a living process, actively managed and regularly reviewed: demonstrating how risks are mitigated.

4. Focus on the outcomes

Focus on the outcomes that are required by the business. It is essential to understand the broader business requirements, any potential risks and how to overcome them. By implementing assurance throughout the programme, you will be able to report on key performance indicators and make sure that success is measured against achieving these.

Tracking emerging quality is critical: if you don't assess your progress you can't see if you are at risk of missing desired outcomes. So it is important not only to track the process but to focus on the prize. Make sure objectives are aligned to outcomes – by clearly communicating and managing these you will drive the right behaviours in your people.

An IDC survey of public and private sector organisations carrying out IT change programmes, published earlier this year, revealed that only 24% of organisations are fully satisfied that they obtain sufficient and timely notice of quality issues. Over half of respondents said that at least 75% of their change-orientated IT projects were delivered on time, but when asked how the level of 'on time' performance was achieved, this was typically addressed by:

- applying more human resources than planned
- releasing additional budget to improve systems
- reducing the scope of the project

Given the current economic situation, where budgets will and have come under increasing scrutiny, cost pressures will exert themselves and post hoc budgetary adjustments will not be as readily available.

5. Monitor, log, report...

Effective monitoring of the programme will ensure early warning of any issues so that remedial action can be taken. Frame the risks that are meaningful to your business stakeholders. Stronger, risk-based metrics will allow you to rescue a situation whereas metrics that simply report on what has happened historically can be like watching a plane fall out of the sky rather than helping you to make a crash landing.

Large programmes often involve multiple third party suppliers whose deliverables will impact progress and be key to the overall outcome. Don't assume that what you have contracted an organisation to do will automatically happen. Check the actual progress as external failures can easily derail a project.

It is also important to understand what priority third party suppliers are giving to your project. Just because you're a big customer doesn't mean you are top of their list. Is your supplier allocating a team of experienced professionals or a team of graduates keen to learn on the job?

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One organisation we came across learnt the hard way. Not only were the requirements for their programme not tight enough but their organisation was not important enough as a client to the supplier to get their 'A team' on the change programme. So it didn't get the right level of service and the result is they are now three years into an 18 month programme.

6. Environmentally aware?

Accurate assessment and understanding of the business systems environment empowers organisations to decide whether to go ahead with a programme or advise against it. For some businesses the complex interconnection of different systems and standards as a result of merging of departments and acquisitions over time can make some options unfeasible.

Sadly, every year organisations invest large sums in programmes that get so far and then come to a standstill as the technical and operational challenges overpower the outcomes.

We pay particular attention to making sure our clients have the right environments and supporting data to ensure that testing is valid. We also believe that however many data migration practices you have completed, if you can, do it one more time!

Summary

Quality assurance cannot absolutely guarantee high quality deliverables, satisfied business and end customers, but it does make it much more likely. You want to identify problems in your change programme early while you can still do something to get things back on track without compromising on outcomes or delivery dates. If you take on board the advice above, you will give yourself a better chance to achieve what your business needs on time and within budget.

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