

The Business Case Lottery.

Or, why don't good ideas always work?

One of the perennial problems of business cases is that they seem to offer so much certainty in theory, but are stubbornly unpredictable in practice.

The problem is that the solutions that we develop in workshops and in on paper are unencumbered by the messiness of the real world. They rarely take into account the compromises and complexities necessary to make a change work let alone the reaction of the organisation to the change itself.

Imagine a typical senior manager or director, or politician, with an objective to deliver an improvement of some kind in their organisation. They may have learned to create a *SMART* objective to specify the benefits and timescales required. They then gather data, ideas and solutions and consult with a wider team. A business case is then prepared that offers some certainty of the costs, time taken, benefits and the risks associated. So far so good. So why does research still say that over 70% of change projects or policy initiatives fail to achieve their goals?

One reason for this is that most ideas proposed by intelligent people sound plausible. However, only a few seem to work well in practice. Hundreds and thousands of procedures, actions, conversations, workarounds and fiddles make any business process work in real life. Those will never appear on a process diagram or an ISO Quality Manual. A business case can never capture the true cost of changing them, the damage done by breaking them or the time taken to re-establish them.

Once the change is introduced, it then takes time for those involved to adjust to the new policies, processes or computers. It takes time for the newly reorganised team to work out who does what and restart the pragmatic relationships that will oil the wheels and start to make the new regime work smoothly. By the time the organisation has recovered a sense of normality, along comes another bright spark with a business case. And all of that is in addition to the fact that projects often take twice long as expected and the original requirements may have changed well before the project completes.

So how can we better plan and manage change?

A good place to start is to spend some time at the front line with the customers and the people actually doing the work. Time spent observing, listening and collecting data at this stage is never wasted. It will become apparent that there are numerous improvements that can be made even before any significant investment, time or project planning.

Secondly, no one can know how well a future change will work in practice. A project therefore has to incorporate a process of learning and evolution with the twists and turns needing careful management. Forcing a solution to meet someone's best guess that was made before the project started cannot lead to an optimum solution when it finally goes live. Projects that do not incorporate a rigorous pilot phase are doomed to be someone's folly.

Thirdly, a process of continuous learning and improvement is needed before, during and after the changes go live. That will rely on a well engaged workforce, some simple tools and techniques and an open and honest culture. People must be able to surface problems honestly rather than massage data to hit pre-defined targets due to fear of harming their career.

Unfortunately it may not be possible to answer the question, "so what is the payback?" with a precise and definitive positive number. But with the right methods in place, sustained improvement is actually more certain, even if not precisely predictable. And that represents a good business case.

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