



RISK DOCTOR BRIEFING

HITTING THE TARGET FIRST TIME, EVERY TIME

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Projects are risky undertakings. This is because they are usually unique and complex, based on assumptions and constraints, with a range of stakeholders, and dependent on the performance of people. Given these tough challenges, it is not surprising that some projects fail. How are we doing?

The Standish Group have been monitoring project performance since 1994, to see how many projects succeed, how many fail, and how many miss at least one important goal (these projects are called “challenged”). Their first set of data revealed a worrying situation, with only 16% of projects succeeding, 31% being complete failures, and the remaining 53% being challenged. The most recent results are better, but not by much. In 2009 there were 32% successful projects, 24% failures and 44% challenged.

It seems that most projects are continuing to miss the target, either completely or in at least one important aspect. Project management claims to be a profession, with established standards, tools, techniques and methodologies, certification and training courses. Project risk management exists to help us manage the inbuilt uncertainty in projects and maximise the chances of project success. Something is clearly wrong. Why do we miss our project targets so often?

If we consider another situation involving targets, such as shooting or archery, we discover four reasons why a target might be missed.

1. **The target is in the wrong place.** Sometimes we aim in one direction but when we come to shoot we find that the target is actually somewhere else. Project goals and objectives often change between the pre-project phase and project start. This is especially true if a bid has been prepared for a client, followed by negotiations that introduce changes before the project team start work. If our project plan and budget was based on a different original target then it is not surprising if we miss the new one. The chances of missing are even higher if the target has been moved to a place that is impossible to hit!
2. **The target is moving.** It is much harder to hit a target that is not fixed. Many projects experience scope creep or volatile requirements as clients and sponsors change their minds over what the project is required to achieve. When the target is moving the chance of hitting it goes down, and if it moves very fast it can be very easy to miss.
3. **The shooter loses control of the shot.** Sometimes the shooter has perfect aim, pointing directly at the target and knowing exactly how to hit it. But if something happens to distract them or they lose focus, they can still miss. Many projects go astray during execution. Despite robust plans, a competent team and clear leadership, there are many unplanned and unexpected things that can cause the project to lose sight of its objectives. When this happens it is not surprising that the target is missed.
4. **The shooter is not good enough.** It is of course possible that the person taking the shot lacks the necessary skills to hit the target. Project teams must be competent to perform the challenges set before them. Without the right capabilities and resources, hitting the target is very difficult.

These four problems have different solutions, which are not hard to implement. **Requirements analysis** should be undertaken to ensure that project objectives are feasible and achievable, so that the target is in the right place. Rigorous and formal **change management** should be in place to control scope creep and stop the target moving too far or too fast. Effective **risk management** will help to keep the project focused on its aim and not be distracted by unexpected events or circumstances. And proper **training and resource planning** should give the project the skills and competence it needs to stay on target.

Not every project failure is the result of inadequate performance by the project team. Sometimes the fault lies outside the project, with misplaced or moving targets. But if we want more successful projects, there are some simple techniques we can use to ensure that we hit the target first time, every time.