

## **Project Closure – the Last Lap**

*In this issue, Ed Naughton, Director General, Institute of Project Management Ireland, outlines what project managers should be aware of during project closeout – and what lessons can be learned.*

Who gets excited about closing out a project? The work is done, the customer has what he/she wants (perhaps!), and everybody's focus is now on the next exciting project. However, if there is no understanding of where reality has differed from plans, there is little hope of making better plans next time. If we don't reflect on the lessons of the past, the likelihood is that similar mistakes will be made in the future.

**What Should Happen** - Closeout should address the following:

**Completing the work** - an orderly closeout requires that some kind of checklist of tasks and issues be prepared and used as a control mechanism. Anyone who has moved into a new house when the builders have already left and moved onto their next project will be able to attest to the fact that users are much more aware of unfinished tasks than the project team members whose attention is by now elsewhere.

**Handing over** - the activity of handover includes not only the transfer of the physical deliverables, but also the training of users, the sharing of technical designs and important design concepts, the provision of drawings and specifications, and much more besides.

**Gaining acceptance for the product** - gaining acceptance is not as simple or straightforward as it might appear at first. A major activity here involves having the customer who is signing the acceptance now accept full responsibility for managing the new product or service. This customer may:

- lack confidence
- be getting negative feed back from users
- realise that what has been delivered is not what is really needed because of their inability to define the scope correctly during project initiation

**Lessons learned** - the object of the lessons learned review is to reflect on the events that took place in the course of the project and to consider what might have been done differently to improve the results obtained.

**Documenting** - completing the documentation and archiving the project records are probably the most monotonous and least exciting parts of the project closeout management.

**Team dispersement** - the final element of project closeout management is disbanding the project team and ending relationships in an orderly way.

**What actually happens** - What has been described above, is common knowledge and common sense, but is far from common practice.

**Payment** - getting paid drives many closeout actions. Unresolved issues and incomplete tasks that frustrate customers and end users drag on; meanwhile, the project manager hopes they will eventually disappear.

**Acrimony** - acceptance becomes acrimonious, with the project team doing the minimum they have to, to get the signature - the customer signing an acceptance only grudgingly.

**Extra costs** - closeout activities cost money. The project team is busy on the next urgent project, and there just never seems to be the time to fit the meeting into a crowded schedule.

**Archiving** - the task of completing project records is assigned a low priority.

**Lessons learned** - Lessons learned may be noted, discussed and documented, but they aren't learned.

**Knowledge Management** - Knowledge Management is a hot management topic these days. It is about capturing and leveraging an organisation's knowledge to achieve or maintain competitive advantage. Learning lessons on a project is much more about the knowledge than it is about information and hence can be characterised as knowledge management. When people possess high know-how they jealously guard it. They are very careful to apply what they know only when it is appropriate to do so, and the greater the degree of mastery of the subject, the greater the finesse they display applying their knowledge.

The learning lessons element of project closeout management needs to be seen not as a part of the bundle of activities associated with completing the project, but as an input to the knowledge management process. As organisations seek to reduce the social and economic impact of poor project performance, project closeout management will emerge as the gateway to an organisation's knowledge about what constitutes excellence in project management practice.