

Chapter 1: My Career Gone

Footnote: **White Elephants**

Throughout my career I saw unceasing torrents of government money poured recklessly into projects which could not possibly end other than in failure. And all due to bad management. As in war, so too in industry, commerce and innovation, the British are lions led by donkeys. [PDF]

In the autumn of 1996 I saw a short item in the information technology supplement of a national newspaper which reported that:

- 80% of IT projects fall short of performance goals.
- 40% fail or are abandoned.
- Less than 40% attract the right skills. ([bad recruiting](#))
- Less than 25% properly integrate business and technology objectives.

These are all, by their very nature, obviously symptomatic of one thing, namely, bad management. The ethos of these projects is familiar to most ordinary tekkies in the IT industry.

They are managed from the top by the 'overgrown schoolboy' civil servant. You can just imagine him 20 or 30 years younger. The nasty, sassy, junior-bullying, egotistic, posh little brat who has been assured from birth of his privileged position within the social pecking order. You see him forever feverishly reinforcing and reconfiguring his political alliances to preserve and further his position. And ruthlessly assassinating the career of any hapless hard-working minion where it renders to him even the slightest advantage. He holds power by rubbishing others and by keeping those immediately below him grid-locked into an insidious state of life-and-death competition.

Below is the pin-striped stuffed-shirted consultant who is there as one of the project's independent evaluators. He is there to keep those who actually do the technical work on their toes, up to scratch and on schedule. A purveyor of technical bullshit. Fluent in the jargon of project management. Straight A's from a top 20 school followed by a 1st from a prestigious Grey Brick. A graduate recruit to a City consultancy. A parrot brained bucket learner with a photographic memory incapable of an original thought. The epitome of young ambition devoid of meaningful experience. A manager without portfolio who subjugates through criticism. An intellectual snob. An insatiable sink for the taxpayer's millions paid in outrageous fees to his grandiose employers.

Ranged against him in the competitive grid-lock is the project manager. He works for the prime contractor which is usually one of the internationally known bastions of the computer, communications and electronics industries. He is a nouveau middle class technocrat who joined the company as a graduate apprentice having gained A-levels from a good grammar school followed by a good engineering 2nd from a Red Brick. During his climb up the company hierarchy, he falls foul of the non-technical political forces within the company and learns the game of corporate politics the hard way. He is also a career assassin when needs must. But politics is not his forte. He is inept at hiding his poison and thus earns a killer reputation which the true politician is able to conceal. He controls team leaders within his project. These are his protégées.

Beneath all are the brains. The technological plebeians who work diligently to design, write, test and commission the actual software. The prime movers among these can be quite mature and experienced. But they all have one thing in common. They are all relentlessly oppressed from above. They are frequently ordered to adopt a technical approach which is diametrically opposed to their far

better judgement. Then they are blamed because it fails. A scapegoat is expelled into the wilderness. Another victim is recruited. No one team is ever privy to an overview of the entire system it is working on. Technical information is dispensed on a 'need to know' basis. No team produces anything which could 'stand alone'. It is always just a component. The grand design is covered by a veil of secrecy. Hence the engineer's parable:

*"A company is like unto a mushroom farm.
Here we all sit working away in the dark.
Then every once in a while the door opens
and they throw a bucket of shit over us."*

Keeping the tekkies in the dark about its overall form and function is not the way to create a successful system. To design a good component one has to understand its interfaces. The only way to understand an interface completely is to understand what is behind it. And what is behind it is the rest of the system. But creating a successful system is not the prime objective of those running the project. Their prime objective is protecting and furthering their individual political positions and corporate careers.

This secrecy thus has a purpose. It is driven by individual self-interest at each level of the project hierarchy. At each level of management the individual endeavours to keep himself indispensable by being the exclusive possessor of his slice of the proprietary information. Some of this is technical such as knowledge of how components being produced by several teams link together to form a functional unit. Some is political like personal access to a key civil servant in charge of some aspect of the project or its funding. At all levels the whole project is nothing but a hideous cock fight.

Could there be a better recipe for failure? Could there be a more flagrant waste of taxpayers' money? Could there exist a more emotionally corrosive and intellectually debilitating environment in which to work? I think not.

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