



White Paper 2021-06

'Guiding Stars' on How to Deliver Large Complex Projects Successfully in a world changed by the pandemic

The pandemic changed the way large complex projects are delivered. The impact of the COVID-19 in many ways accelerated pre-existing trends – like the need for new and better virtual meeting platforms and knowledge of how to use them efficiently – but also created unexpected consequences – like how it leads to permanent change in organisational culture. Organisations need to trust their employees to be both loyal and efficient in their new setting. Anticipable or not - it has added complexity to our working life.

What does it mean for the brave endeavour of large and complex projects, where the complexity of cross-function, cross border, new technologies and long timespans were already making it hard to succeed, or deliver in line with expectations?

This White Paper shares key learnings to provide useful 'guiding stars' for 'remote team projects'. They stem from our own experience, discussions in our network and our collaboration with clients who already navigate these large, complex projects in remote and highly virtual environment.

What is new in the new reality for large complex projects?

We have a 'new normal' as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. And the implications on our societies and organisations are many. One example - it has now been tested at large scale: efficient work from our homes - even in large complex projects - is possible. The benefits of remote work include less business travel saving the environment, time and money, spending more time with loved ones and avoiding cost for un-utilised office space. Working from home has for many become a permanent part of our work life, and only the balance between office and homework remains to be debated and settled.

However, one of the most important success factors of these mega-projects was to have 'integrated and co-located teams'. This is no longer guaranteed.

...and what stays the same?

What stays the same for years to come is that *people* will do the work in effective teams. As we stated in of our early White Papers [2013-01]: 'Projects are first of all a human adventure'. People will continue to be responsible for projects to be delivered safely, at the right quality in an efficient way. Therefore, most of the key success factors - for large, complex projects without a doubt - will also stay the same: the right processes, efficient systems and skilled, motivated people working as a close team with an emotional engagement in project success.

Fragile projects suddenly became even more fragile

Large complex projects were fragile before the pandemic, and the added complexity introduced by more remote work adds to that fragility. This calls for new and smarter ways of working.

...and the project start-up process has become even more important

Remote work adds fragility to already fragile Large, Complex Projects

The importance of the project start-up process has increased due to more remote project work. And maybe even the start-up activities themselves will be delivered remotely. Aspects such as integrating the team members, clarifying the scope, setting roles and responsibilities, build a team of trust and openness, set efficient communication and tools, identify expectations and synergies are all becoming more important. We have therefore dedicated a full White Paper to the topic of remote project start-up [[White Paper 2021-07](#)].

What can we do to make large, complex projects less fragile in the 'remote team projects'? We have identified some key 'guiding stars'.

'Guiding stars' for high performing remote teams

As large complex projects will continue to be delivered by people who now to a larger extent work remotely, we need to organise in new ways to accommodate for our high performing teams to continue to deliver high quality work. Our 'guiding stars' can direct us in how we organise; our ways of working; the tools we use; our remote team culture and how we communicate in the virtual working environment.

- Find new ways for **informal communication**
- Seek new **synergies**
- **Visualise, clarify** and **simplify**
- Strengthen your **facilitation** skills

Find new ways for informal communication

One aspect often mentioned as a change for the remote team is that the accidental encounters do not take place! The possibility to e.g. build trust through informal exchanges or catch and solve challenges 'on the spot' when identified is reduced when we do not naturally meet. This is an overarching concern. These synergies lacking in the remote teams needs to be addressed to sustain long term efficiency. Maintaining occasions for informal communication is essential: from properly facilitated

meetings that allow space for informal chatter, to planning ‘virtual coffee’ sessions emulating coffee machine discussions in small groups. This requires proactive organisation and leadership, even more so in the new virtual normal.

Seek new synergies

To mitigate the risks of e.g. travel restrictions and to leverage the full potential of the project team, seek new areas of synergy in the remote project team.

An example is vendor surveillance when working remotely which will require new forms of collaboration and flexibility. Project team members might need to take on new – temporary or permanent – responsibilities. Collaboration across company borders, e.g. using each other’s local resources can introduce opportunities for team integration in new ways. Even before the pandemic we had described in White Paper [2018-15] the benefits of collaboration across organisational borders. Cross borders collaboration now needs to go even further. Site visits can be recorded and shared with other parts of the project organisation. This will require the ability to set clear expectations and well-defined roles and responsibilities.

Visualise

Easy access to relevant and up to date key project information - both to locate and to interpret it - helps the disbursed project team to stay informed and on track without having to rely on meetings or one-to-one communication. The concept of the Obeya room (war room) as described in a previous White Paper [2017-09] can be translated to the virtual space in an effective manner – enhanced by occasions for informal exchanges around indicators.

Some examples of key project information to make easily available are the convergence plan [White Papers 2012-04, 2015-17] / high level schedule, scope and interface dependencies, roles and responsibilities, organisation charts with contact details, key performance indicators, etc.

Clarify

With interaction limited by the virtual communication tools, the importance of clarifying key aspects of project work increases. E.g. processes and roles and responsibilities are key areas where project team members ask for greater clarity as a consequence of remote teams.

The responsibilities of the individual and the teams must be defined and communicated at the start of the project and more systematically and formally updated as they evolve. Interdependencies of scope and work packages and decision processes need to be well mapped to allow interaction between the right people without necessarily having to go up and down the hierarchy. The room to ‘wobble’ roles and responsibilities into place along the way is drastically reduced in the virtual space, and the room to communicate changes even less. More clarity is needed than before on those aspects.

Simplify

Today the complexity of large industrial projects is increased by the fact that teams are not ‘integrated’ to the same degree. Tools, processes and communication (including communication channels) need to reduce the complexity as much as absolutely possible. All to support each individual to add as much value to the project as possible.

Seek simplicity in packaging work and defining roles and responsibility considering the geographical and movement constraints in doing so. Simplify access to information by reducing the number of clicks, finding the right and intuitive tools, planning for efficient information sharing and using easy-to-read language, images and models.

Facilitation

Many of the findings and challenges described calls for greater knowledge of facilitation – of systems, processes and people. Facilitation of meetings, information flow, stakeholder transactions and decision making is increasingly becoming a necessary skill – inhouse or through external resources. This competency is today under-educated and under-utilised and should be part of all leadership training. In fact, the leadership role altogether is moving more towards facilitation, from more decision making and team direction.

This competency can be developed inhouse or brought in through external resources.

One ‘facilitation’ pain-point is the decision-making process. The *process* itself needs greater ‘facilitation’ in the virtual space: what decisions needs to be made by who - the right people only; when, considering e.g. time zones, where; and how – process and communication. Moreover, the *meetings* require more planning and a decision-making process adapted to the virtual setting. Virtual decision meetings need to be structured and facilitated to ensure participation, allow difficult discussion to take place and converge towards a decision. It then needs to be communicated to those affected and information systems need to be updated to allow visualisation.

One interesting aspect of the virtual meeting in large complex projects - and their facilitation - is how to create a climate of trust and openness to promote constructive debate and conflict. In this area, we and many of us will keep learning. We need to ask ourselves: *How can we build the trust needed for ‘virtual meeting conflict’ management? And how do we plan for these debates?*

Summary

Large, complex projects will continue to be planned, led, engineered, procured, and constructed by people. However, these people will to a greater extent work in remote teams, where the team members will deliver from wherever they are - be that home, office, or other locations. This adds complexity to these already fragile projects.



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To accommodate for continued safety focus, high quality and efficiency, keep the ‘guiding stars’ in mind when setting up our processes, systems, organisation and ways of working with our people:

- Plan and execute the **project start-up** carefully and thoroughly. It was important before, it is critical now,
- Enhance occasions for **informal conversations** and exchanges to emulate the ‘integrated team’ spirit,
- Seek **synergies** to mitigate risks connected to the pandemic situation,
- **Visualise** as much as possible to ease information flow and avoid information overload,
- Seek higher level of **clarity** to ensure nothing falls between chairs. Rework and recovery have become harder and must be avoided,

- Develop **facilitation** skills in the project teams to ensure that the right discussions take place at the right time with the right people and in the right format - and allowing timely and efficient decision. But also, that a culture of trust and openness is built to ensure efficient teamwork.

Projects are a human adventure – today and in the years to come. Companies that already put people and collaboration at the centre of delivery are well placed to make the best of the future.

How can we build the trust needed for ‘virtual meeting conflict’ management? And how do we plan for these debates? This is one of the most difficult facilitation challenges. We would be very interested to hear your experiences and tips.

References:

- 1) [White Paper 2013-01](#) A Manifesto - Projects are First of All a Human Adventure: Why You Can’t Manufacture Projects on a Standardized Assembly Line
- 2) [White Paper 2021-07](#) Building Remote Project Teams in Project Start-Up Phase
- 3) [White Paper 2018-15](#) How to Reap Benefits from Improved Collaboration between Owner, Contractors and Subcontractors
- 4) [White Paper 2017-09](#) Why Custom Indicators and Visual Dashboards Are So Important for the Success of Large Complex Projects
- 5) [White Paper 2012-04](#) Convergence Management: the Key to Large, Complex Projects Success
- 6) [White Paper 2015-17](#) How to Produce and Update a Convergence Plan



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