

Managing School IT Projects

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Every school IT project comes with its own set of unique challenges. This article explores what sets school IT projects apart and some keys to delivering successful school IT projects.

It is important to realise that in schools, like other organisations there are different types of IT projects and they need to be managed differently. There is no one size fits all approach to IT projects, and this is particularly true in schools. At a high level there are four key types of IT projects in schools:

- Core systems and infrastructure
- Key application change/upgrade
- Device fleet change/upgrade
- Disaster recovery

This brings us very quickly to one of the key challenges of school IT projects, which is the demand for technical resources that have enough experience in the relevant technology that is required to be implemented. Where businesses with a similar number of users and end point devices would have dedicated & experienced IT staff for each of these types of IT or have partnerships with external service providers that have the specific skills – the smaller school IT team does not always have this. In the day to day running of school IT this requires IT staff to be multi-skilled in an industry where it is extremely difficult to hold all the skills on all the technologies. But there are further implications for IT projects, particularly for time management.

It is not uncommon for the IT staff to be required to work on a school IT project to also have to juggle their involvement with other IT responsibilities within the school. This is obviously not ideal as the individual may have to shift focus at inopportune times. For example, an IT staff member stepping out of a key testing exercise of a core system to respond to an endpoint device failure affecting a senior educator. It is an understandable decision but it can have significant flow on effects to the rest of the project. Particularly if the staff member does not advise others in the project team of his/her actions and they assume that the testing has been successful.

Getting the priorities right

Most importantly, every project must have an agreed business case and a mechanism to judge whether the project is and remains desirable, viable, and achievable.

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Once a business case has been determined, there are definitely some distinct differences in how different schools prioritise their IT projects. An early indicator of probable success is how well they are planned. As the old saying goes failing to plan is planning to fail. Some schools put a considerable amount of time and thought into forward planning, proactively identifying and prioritising their IT projects. As it can be difficult for schools to use ROI to prioritise projects some struggle to get this right. Others are unsure of the impact that one project can have on other existing systems or planned projects. There are two different frameworks for prioritising projects that I have seen work well. The first is the two to two matrix of urgent and important (see below).

		URGENT	
		YES	NO
IMPORTANT	YES	1	2
	NO	3	4

A key to using this framework is to get priority two and three in the right order. Everyone can see that urgent and important comes first, and not urgent and not important comes last. Unfortunately it is common, often unconscious mistake to put the urgent and not important ahead of the important and not urgent.

As mentioned above, in isolation a single project can also appear as not urgent and not important but if another project of a more urgent and important nature require this completed first then the importance of this single project must rise. You need a clear understanding of what impact all aspects of all projects will have on other areas within your existing and planned IT environment.

An alternative framework is based on the triage nurse in hospital emergency. Tested and refined for over a century, it prioritises which patient gets to see the doctor first based on the condition of the patient. First priority goes to the patient who left untreated will die. Next priority goes to the patient who left untreated will get worse. Third priority goes to patients who are in a stable condition – which is they need attention, but their condition will not change substantially while they wait for it. Only within each of these categories will the relative pain and time of arrival be considered. While you might curse this system if you go to hospital emergency with a badly sprained ankle, it can be very useful when translated to apply to prioritising school IT projects. Put simply priority goes to projects that if left undone would undermine the future of the school – that is the projects that address the overall goals and strategic direction of the school. Next in line are projects that address issues that if left unattended will get worse – e.g more users will be affected. Finally the projects that relate to issues in a stable condition get attention. Like the triage nurse, this might not make you popular, but it will certainly help you to make the right choices. It prevents projects being prioritised based on who yells loudest or what was thought of first. Making the best use of time and resources

Once you have prioritised your projects then you need to schedule them. Once again how this is done can be a key indicator of future success. Here is also where schools gain some ground back on their business counterparts. The extended out-of-hours available to school IT, not to mention the term breaks are the envy of business IT teams. It provides school IT teams with an opportunity to implement numerous smaller projects during school terms and use the time between terms to implement major projects.

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Once a project has been committed to, it is important to get the support and commitment of key stakeholders. This goes beyond them agreeing that it is a good idea. It is essential that there is a shared understanding of the scope and that the detailed requirements are reviewed and agreed. Deliverables should be clearly described and their acceptance criteria clearly defined. This will help to flush out any early misunderstandings as well as potential changes to resourcing and budget requirements, which may also have implications to the project schedule. A lack of open discussion and exploration of the issues, including skill requirements, staff and stakeholder availability, is a major cause of project failure. In particular be wary of IT staff overstating their expertise in the hope of acquiring the expertise during the project. A lack of technical ability can often lead to an inability to complete the project in the allocated window, or even place other systems at risk of failure. This can be catastrophic with school IT projects as the next implementation window may be a term or school year into the future.

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It is also important that the project has an owner/sponsor right from the start. This will ensure that it does not just meander along costing the school money without clear outcomes being defined. For larger projects that have a broader impact the sponsor may be a project steering committee, however if possible a single project owner is generally preferred.

Communication

Once the project has commenced it is a good idea to have regular meetings of the project team to ensure that it remains on track. Do as much preparation work as possible in the lead up to the key implementation window to ensure all of the external pre-requisites have been addressed and that the success of the project is within the control of the project team.

Within the project team itself it is important to establish a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each team member and/or external organisations and to manage by exception. It is also a good idea to be very clear on the communication channels for the project. Some simple rules around the use of collaboration tools and copying in the project manager on all project correspondence can prevent misunderstandings while allowing direct communication between team members on specific issues.

Summary

In many ways school IT projects are like all other projects. They need to be well defined, appropriately resourced with realistic budgets and timeframes. They also need to be well managed, both within the project team and also the stakeholder involvement. Get any one of these things wrong and the project will drift off course. A key challenge with school IT projects is actually knowing enough at the outset to determine if the proposed project is well defined, appropriately resourced, etc. Too often internal IT teams underestimate the technical challenges of the endeavour on which they have embarked until it is too late.

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