

**Measuring Progress Towards Success:
A Survey of Project Performance Reporting
25 Sep 06**

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Executive Summary

Purpose

There has been much published on the subject of IT project failures in terms of cost and time overruns, but cost and time alone cannot describe success. If we can make the assertion that success is the goal of every project, then success is a fundamental business objective which we have found is often inadequately defined. Number one on the National Audit Office/Office of Government Commerce publication "List of Common Causes of Project Failure" is:

Lack of clear link between the project and the organisation's key strategic priorities, including agreed measures of success.

Where evidence of success is required, for example justifying the investment to project customers, measurements will be required. This measurement requires quantitative definition of success criteria that are meaningful to all customers to ensure that the right data is collected. Rather than solely focussing on financial measures and time, metrics for success should include how much the organisation is improving as a direct consequence of the implementation of the project. This report summarises the results of a survey of 29 UK Government departments and agencies on how performance measures used to report progress of IT projects.

Key Findings

The responses indicated that:

- 62% of projects have one or more quantifiable measures in place, the rest have none.
- 43% of projects show some alignment of measures to their project goals.
- 52% of projects show measures aligned to some business impact, the remainder focusing on internal project assessment or lacking metrics.

Issues Raised

Our survey revealed that over a third of projects had no quantitative performance measures in place. This suggests either a reluctance to quantify formal success criteria, a lack of skills to do so, or that the information is not readily available. The lack of explicit definitions of anticipated/expected business change increases project risk arising from misunderstanding objectives.

Less than a half of projects surveyed had quantitative measures that correlated with project goals or reflected business impact. This suggests that projects with quantified measures are not aligning them to the projects' business impact. Our analysis indicates that only a quarter of respondents demonstrated an effective use of quantifiable measures of business success.

The Government approach of incremental delivery seems not to have been uniformly adopted. Long running projects lacking any quantitative performance measures gives cause for concern over how these projects can be successfully managed towards outcomes that meet key strategic priorities.

Our key issues are that:

- One third of projects reporting no quantitative performance measures should be of major concern for the accountability of public investment.
- Two thirds of projects need a stronger focus on the measurement of business success.
- The majority of government departments need to reappraise how the business impact of their IT projects is captured and monitored.

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1 Introduction

“You get what you measure” is an often quoted management maxim, implying that something is unlikely to be realised if it is not measured. Perhaps less obviously, measuring the wrong thing is probably going to result in a lot of wasted effort. Selecting the right performance metrics and making measurements should therefore be helpful to management, indeed the right performance metrics should define what we mean by success.

1.1 Background

i-logue Ltd has many years experience in the area of Government IT and has observed several initiatives to improve the success rate of IT projects. IT governance has increased on many projects with the application of PRINCE2, initiatives such as the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) Gateway review process and more recently the introduction of Managing Successful Programmes (MSP). Costs and timescale elements of project management seem to be under better control, but there are still well publicised exceptions.

Cost and timescales are not the only measures of success and the question therefore arises as to whether projects are defining success in quantifiable terms (other than time and cost) which mean something to the business sponsors and if they are, is progress towards those success criteria being measured? From our own company experience we know that there is a wide variation in how organisations monitor project progress towards success and the research behind this paper sought to provide evidence of the variation that currently exists in a wide spectrum of projects.

In April 2004, a report¹ by a working group from the Royal Academy of Engineering and British Computer Society commented that the success rate of IT projects remains too low (even taking into account recent improvements). The report identified several key success factors for complex IT projects with “measuring progress” amongst them:

- client-supplier relationship;
- evolutionary project management;
- requirements management;
- change management;
- **measuring progress**;
- contractual arrangements;
- risk management;
- technical issues.

The National Audit Office in conjunction with the Office of Government Commerce has publicised common causes of project failure², the first in their list being:

- Lack of clear link between the project and the organisation's key strategic priorities, including agreed measures of success.

From these publications, the measurement of progress towards success is already a subject of some public concern.

1.2 Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which a sample of UK Government IT projects have defined measures of success and how they are using these measures to monitor project implementation and business consequences.

¹ Royal Academy of Engineering and British Computer Society Working Group, *The Challenges of Complex IT Projects*: The report of a working group from the Royal Academy of Engineering and The British Computer Society, April 2004. ISBN: 1903496152.

² NAO/OGC list of common causes of project failure, http://www.ogc.gov.uk/documents/Project_Failure.pdf

1.3 Document Structure

The following sections in this document cover the approach taken, an analysis of the responses and ends with conclusions and recommendations based on the results.

2 Approach

2.1 Information Gathering

Information was acquired for the survey via the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act (2000) process to approach Government departments and agencies with a number of questions relating to how they used performance measures in reporting project progress to the “business”. The 29 organisations selected were relatively large organisations, each potentially making a significant investment in IT projects.

2.2 Question Rationale

The questions posed in the requests for information were designed to be answered from information that might be readily available within the organisation. Under the FOI Act, public organisations have no obligation to supply information that they do not hold or need to expend additional effort to provide. The information requested and the rationale behind them is explained below. The exact wording of the information requests were:

- a. A brief description (short paragraph) of a single current major IT project in your organisation, for example one that has executive board level interest.
- b. Start date of the project.
- c. Planned end date of the project.
- d. Definitions of the performance measures used by the business to assess the success of the deployment of the system into the organisation.
- e. The date when reporting against these measures started/is due to start.
- f. To whom the reports are/will be provided.

The project description provided the business context of a project. Organisations were free to select one project from their IT programme. The nature of the project was not of major interest to the survey, but rather how its success was being measured. This freedom of project choice allowed organisations to present their best projects in terms of performance reporting, however we had no means of knowing whether they did.

We draw a distinction between quantification and measurement. *Quantification* is the process of constructing phrases which provide a contextual meaning for numbers, i.e. it is a process of definition. *Measurement* is the practical process of acquiring actual numbers. The main thrust of the survey was around quantification though a few responses did provided evidence of measurement by noting numeric values.

Government publications on IT project management³ recommend an incremental approach to delivering system capability. The start date of reporting performance measures in relation to the start and end date of the projects should provide an indication of the degree of incremental delivery, i.e. a project not starting reporting until the project end date would be unlikely to be delivering incremental capability.

The definitions of the performance measures provided the critical information for this research. We allowed organisations to make their own interpretation of “performance measure” but qualifying it with the business focus for success deployment. We hoped to get more than just time and budget measures.

“But you can’t measure everything. What about the qualitative or intangible elements of this project?” This is an exclamation we hear often. Indeed you would not want to measure everything and too much measurement represents no value to people. With the required skills, it is possible to quantify any degree of improvement sought, even with so called qualitative elements or intangibles. Take as

³ Cabinet Office, Successful IT: Modernising Government in Action

example a project to change the way people perceive an issue. Finding out what percentage of a sample population perceive the issue in a certain way is always feasible. We assert that it is **always** possible to quantify the attributes of any desired change but the subtlety is in finding and using those measures that represent value to people. All the dimensions of success should always be quantified for purposes of clarifying objectives and communication.

2.3 Performance Measure Categorisation

The questions we wished to answer from the research were:

- To what degree are the performance measures in use within projects capable of being used quantitatively? More practically, this might be viewed as how many measures can you put a number against?
- To what degree are the performance measures relevant to any business impact as opposed to internal project assessment?
- How “joined up” are the measures with the business goals of the project, i.e. can the measures be used to monitor progress towards what the organisation is trying to achieve through the project?
- To what extent is the incremental delivery of projects evident from the use of performance measures?

In relation to these research questions, we used a system of categorising the performance measures received in responses in the following terms:

- **Quantifiable.** The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb “measure” as “To ascertain or determine the spatial magnitude or quantity of something”. For measures to be measurable, it should therefore be possible to get a **numerical value** for the measure that means something against the definition of the measure. For example “efficiency” might be a measure, but without further definition an efficiency number carries little meaning. However, 42 as a measure of “number of system users” provides some meaning if we understand what qualifies as a “system user”. Where measures were defined in sufficient detail to convey meaning with a number, these were deemed quantifiable.
- **External Measures.** Measures quoted that have business impact outside the system being implemented were classified as external measures. The mental test for external measures is to ask whether the measure would still be relevant if the system were taken away. e.g. customer response time would probably be an external measure as the customer would probably still exist if the system were removed and the customer would still have some expectation of a response time from the organisation.
- **Internal Measures.** Measures that are not external (as explained in the preceding bullet) but relevant to the system being implemented are classed as internal measures. Rate of help desk calls from system users and system stability would be examples of internal measures.
- **Goal Addressing Measures.** Almost all of the responses described one or more of the business goals of the project in the project description, e.g. financial savings, reduced bureaucracy, streamlined processes, better customer support etc. We sought to identify whether these goals had any associated performance measures defined. These measures would be implicitly External Measures, but not all External Measures would be Goal Addressing Measures, i.e. business impact may be wider than the defined project goals.

2.4 Assessment Metrics

Our own definitions of the metrics we used for this assessment were:

- **Quantifiable Measure Percentage:** The percentage of measures provided for a project that were capable of being measured (getting a meaningful number). A 0% figure on this scale would indicate that none of the measures presented were defined in a way by which a group of people could consistently interpret a numeric value against the measure.
- **External Measure Percentage:** The percentage of measures provided by an organisation that were both Quantifiable and External Measures (as defined above). A 100% figure on this scale would indicate that all measures reported were able to have a numeric value

meaningfully put against them and that they all reflected the impact of the project in terms of business outcomes.

- **Goals Coverage.** The percentage of project goals expressed that had at least one quantifiable measure related to each goal, e.g. if a project had a goal of “cutting bureaucracy” and stated a performance measure of “time taken in processing cases”, the relationship was close enough for the goal to be counted as being covered by the performance measure. Strictly speaking in this example we would need to understand what the organisation’s stakeholders meant by “cutting bureaucracy” (i.e. whether it meant cutting the number of forms) but the analysis gave the organisation the benefit of doubt.
- **Performance Reporting Start Point.** The percentage of the way through the project before performance reporting starts, e.g. if the project starts reporting on day one of the project the figure would be 0%, whereas if performance reporting starts at the end of the project the figure would be 100%. The earlier performance reporting starts in the project the more chance management has to assess the results and take any necessary corrective action, i.e. a lower value is better.

2.5 Validity of Responses

This research could be challenged on the basis of ineffective enquiry response processes in terms of tracking down the information requested. The response content did indicate that most organisations had gone to some effort in providing the detail required. Indeed many organisations had sought additional indirect clarification by e-mail or through visits to relevant areas of our company website.

We conducted the survey based on the supposition that if performance measures were being rigorously applied to projects then the details of these measures would be readily available either through published sources (e.g. intranets, project reporting) or through a simple enquiry to a programme or project management office. If performance measures were not openly published within the organisation, then there would be cause for concern that they were either not being formally applied, or that their value as a channel for communicating project progress, success, or problems to stakeholders was being diminished through lack of availability. If therefore the information wasn’t provided due to its lack of availability, then these results still provide a valid interpretation of the effective use of performance measures in organisations.

2.6 Results Presentation

We have avoided focussing on numeric averages in presenting the results as averages obscure an important fact of life – things vary. The degree of variation is often more informative than the absolute value, so our assessment results are presented graphically to show the numerical spread. A second advantage of graphical presentation is that it highlights extremes. This is important in the context of this report because there is no “right” answer to the questions posed in the request for information. The assessment measures allow us to comment on the extremes in the analysis section.

3 Analysis

3.1 Survey Responses

The survey statistics are shown in Table 1. More detail of the response performance in the context of the Freedom of Information Act (2000) is provided in an annex.

Requests For Information (RFI) Statistics	Result
Number of Requests for Information (RFI) sent.	29
Number of acknowledgements received.	26
Number of responses to the questions.	24
Number of responses providing answers to the questions.	21

Table 1 –Survey Response

3.2 Performance Measure Categories

The number of measures reported by each organisation varied, but the nature of the measures provided the subject of analysis rather than the number or measures. For reference, the number of measures reported by each organisation is shown in Figure 1.

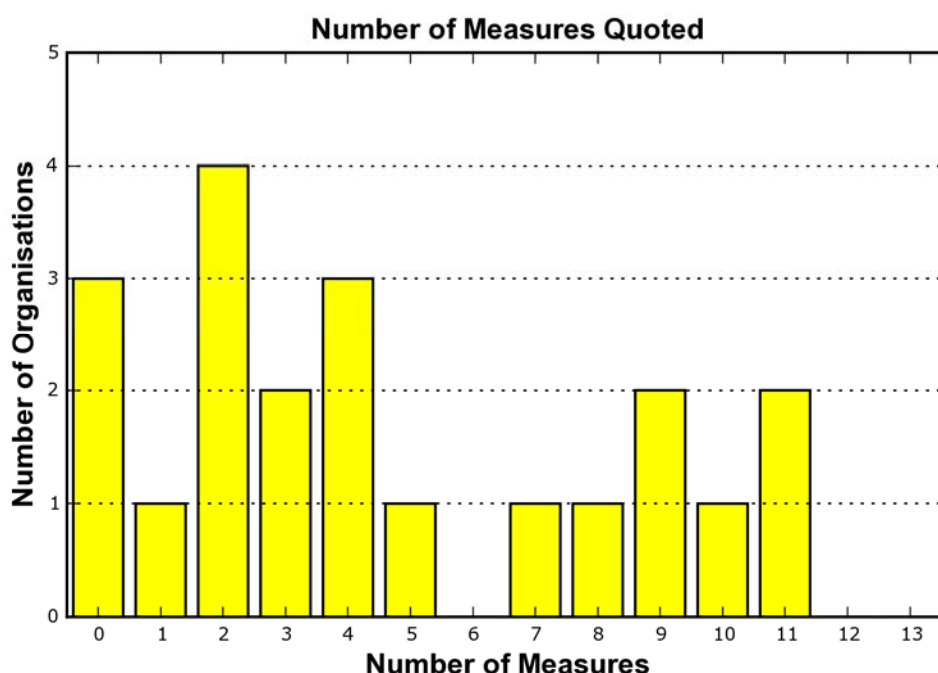


Figure 1 – Distribution of Number of Measures Reported by Organisations

Note that we do not assume that these figures represent *all* the measures in use within projects. Our request for information emphasised that we were only interested in those that were used by the business for assessing successful deployment.

3.2.1 Quantitative Measures

We assessed each performance measure in the responses received by a quantification test, i.e. place a number in front of it and ask “does it make sense?” For example, one response included a performance measure “proportion of information held in shared areas”. So the quantification test would result in “42 proportion of information held in shared areas”. With a slight adjustment to “42% of

information held in shared areas”, this passes the quantification test. However another response “improved information sharing” did not pass the quantification test as a number in front of it conveys no meaning. There was evidence of qualitative measures such as perceptions being defined in quantifiable terms, e.g. “percentage of staff who believe that the system provides easy access to information.”

All of the responses were analysed using this test. We assessed the measures as quantitative wherever minor amendments allowed us to, so the results are optimistic rather than pessimistic. Examples of some of the quantitative measures and non-quantitative measures provided in responses are shown in Table 2.

Quantitative Measures	Measures not Quantitatively Expressed
Number and category of calls placed to Service Desk. Wasted time due to inability to use basic functions. Reductions in delays in processing cases. Calls answered. Use of the system by staff. Availability of the system to its users.	Meeting the Modernising Government target that all newly created public records will be electronically stored and retrieved. Compliancy with relevant technical, quality and data standards as mandated for the development of new Government systems by the UK e-Government Interoperability Framework – the “e-GIF”. Efficiency and Effectiveness. Burden on compliant operators. Quality.

Table 2 – Example Quantitative Measures

The percentage of measures found to be quantitative was calculated by dividing by the number of measures in the response. As an example in one case, two measures were reported and both were found to be quantitative so the project scored 100% on this scale.

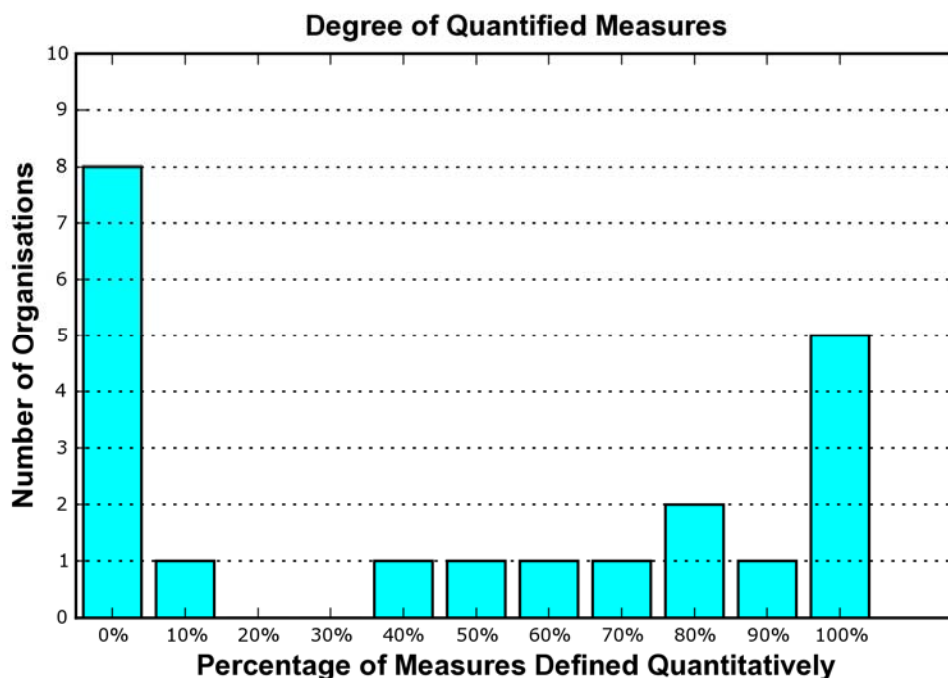


Figure 2 – Distribution of Percentage of Measures Defined Quantitatively

Figure 2 shows that 5 of the responses had expressed all their performance measures in quantifiable terms; however 8 presented no quantifiable performance measures. 8 organisations had a proportion of their measures that were quantifiable. 38% of organisations appeared to have no quantifiable means of measuring success.

The responses within the 80%-100% range on this scale showed a systematic approach to measurement; however those outside this range lacked consistency which may indicate no formal approach to the issue.

3.2.2 Internal and External Measures

Each quantitative measure was analysed to discover whether it was measuring an external impact of the project on the business, or an internal feature of the system. The test for which category the measure fell into was provided by asking whether the measure would still be of concern to the business if the system were removed. Examples of responses classed as internal and external measures are shown in Table 3.

<i>Internal Measures</i>	<i>External Measures</i>
System stability. Number of support calls. Level of inappropriate calls to the Helpdesk. Resolving system incidents within timescales.	Faster year end accounts closure. Number of security breaches. Speed of enquiry handling. Questionnaire satisfaction scores.

Table 3 – Internal and External Measures

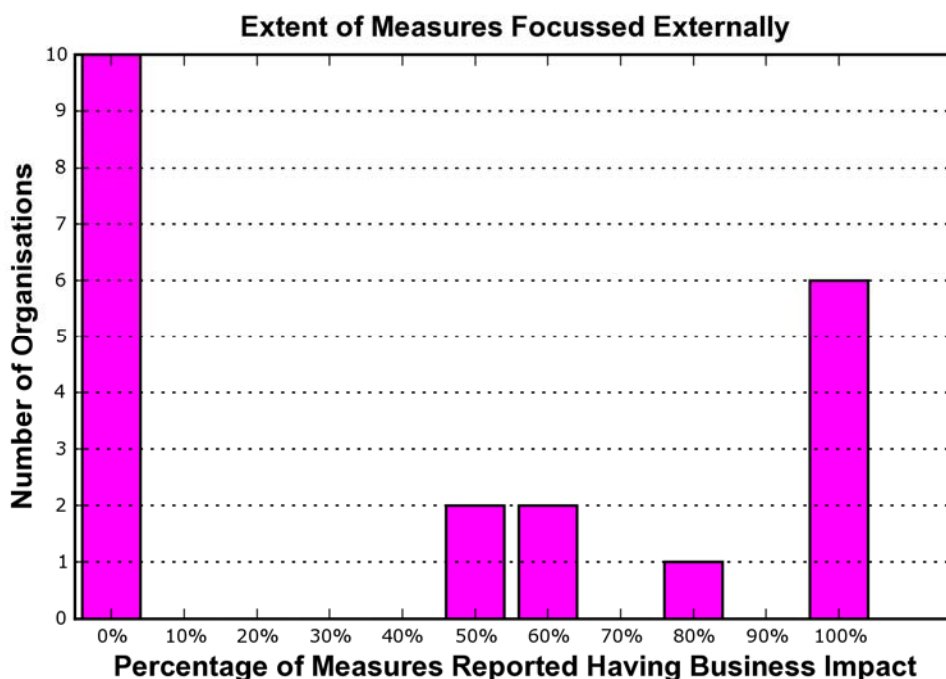


Figure 3 – Distribution of Percentage of Measures Found to be External Measures

48% of projects reported no quantitative measures of impact outside the project/system, i.e. no measure of business impact. For this set of projects there appears to be no commonly understood and agreed view of what quantitative business change will result from the project investment.

3.3 Goal Coverage

We analysed the performance measures to establish the degree to which the project goals provided in project descriptions were covered by performance measures. In most of the responses the number of performance measures was greater than the number of project goals (as we would expect) but if a project goal was important enough to be mentioned in the project description then hopefully there would have been at least one performance measure related to it. We did not seek a direct relationship but allowed some flexibility, for example a performance measure of the number of “customer transactions” was close enough to the goal of “better customer support” to be counted as a goal-linked measure.

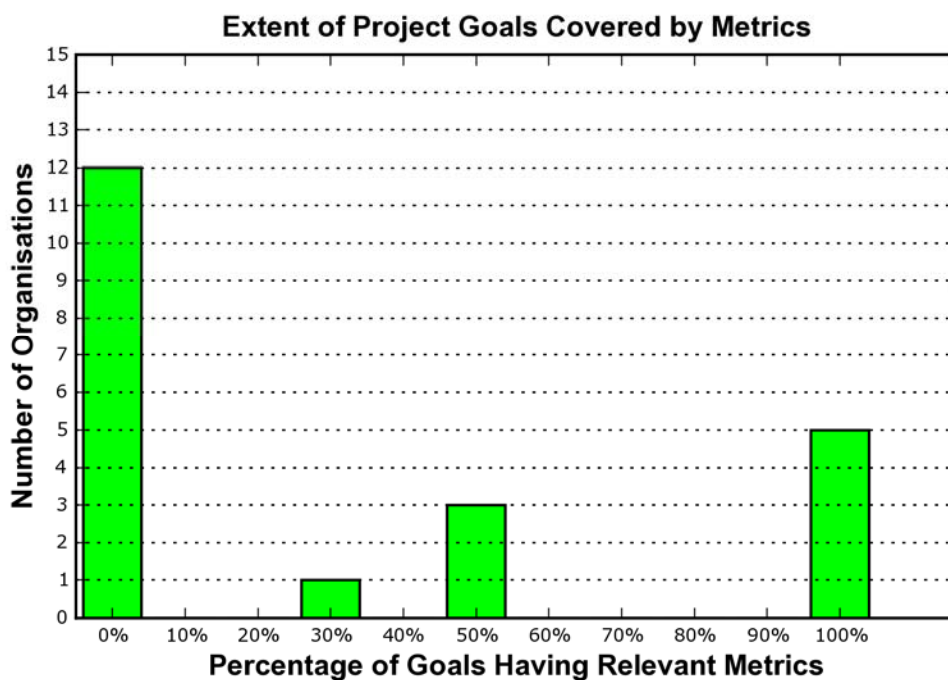


Figure 4 – Distribution of Goal Coverage by Performance Measures

In 57% of responses we could find no linkage between the performance measures and the goals of the project. This should be of particular concern to their business sponsors as this indicates a lack of quantifiable metrics to assess the degree of progress towards the goals of the project. This situation was emphasised in some responses by remarks that the metrics would be addressed at the end of the project when benefits were to be assessed. Without clear definition of the goals in metric terms, there can be little assurance that everyone has made the same interpretation of what success might be and made coordinated plans for it.

3.4 Project Length

Recommendation 12 of the Successful IT: Modernising Government in Action paper⁴ stated

“Departments and agencies must adopt a modular and/or incremental approach to projects, unless there are very strong reasons for not doing so. The approach to be taken must be clearly documented before large projects are initiated and must explicitly consider the capabilities of the organisation and its supplier(s) and the size of each proposed increment.”

The reasoning behind this recommendation was that it is easier to deliver positive results through a series of small steps rather than large ones and the negative effect of any step going wrong is minimised. Producing evidence to validate the outcomes of each step should involve the use of some quantitative performance measures. Without quantitative definitions, measurements would lack the consistency required for trends to be visible over the period of incremental deliveries.

The use of quantitative performance measures provides some indication of whether incremental approaches are being effectively deployed on large projects in terms of demonstrating value delivered and avoiding large scale negative impacts.

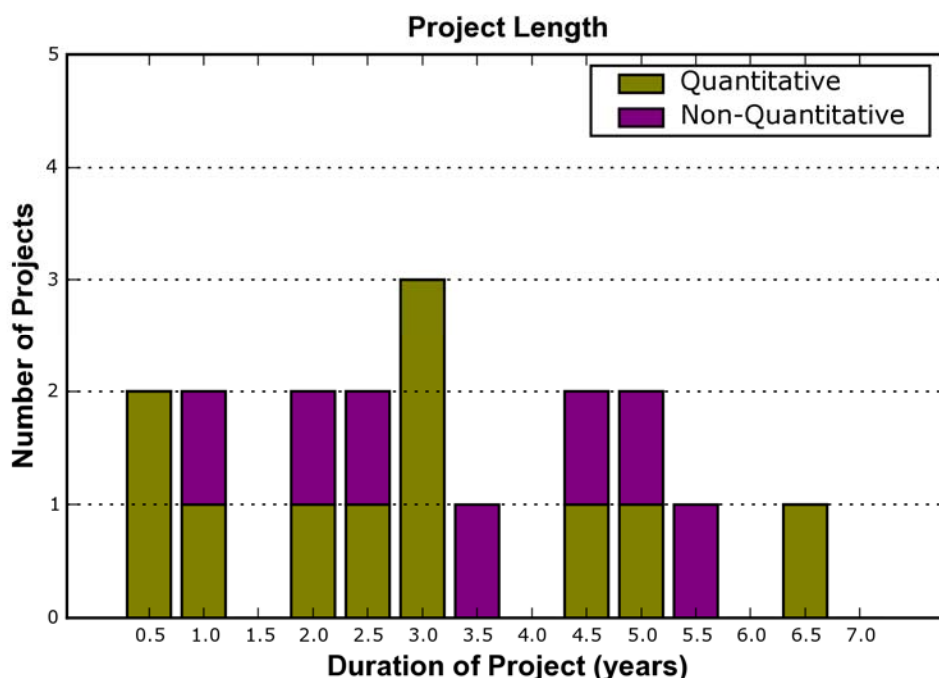


Figure 5 – Project Length

18 responses provided start and end dates to enable the calculation of project duration. Of these, 67% had a planned duration of more than 2 years. Figure 5 shows that projects having no quantifiable metrics are spread over the range of project durations. The approach of incremental delivery may have been interpreted by some as delivering products by increments with success only materialising when all the products have been delivered. The intent of incremental delivery is to achieve small steps of success through delivery of a number of products, an approach that should involve the early deployment of success measures for progress monitoring.

3.5 Performance Reporting Start Points in the Project Timescale

Only 52% (11 from 21) of the responses provided a date answer to the request for “The date when reporting against these measures started/is due to start”. For two of those that did give a date, the responses indicated that these were not reporting performance measures of success. 43% (9 from 21) responses provided valid answers to the question posed.

⁴ Cabinet Office, 2000

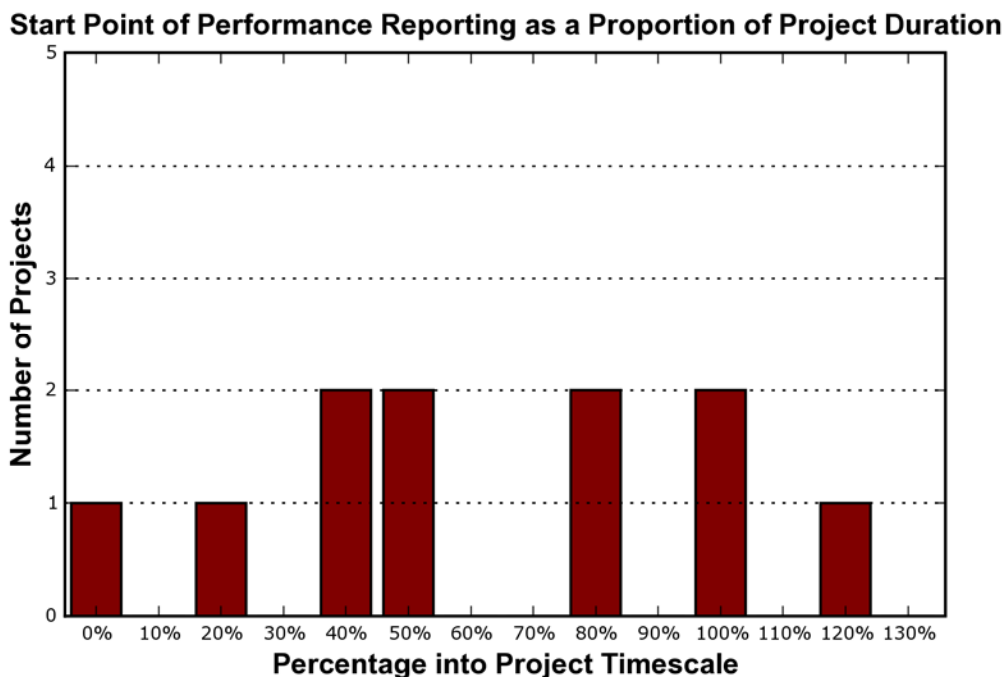


Figure 6 – Start Time of Performance Reporting

On this chart, 0% represents projects that started reporting on success measures from the beginning of the project. 100% represents projects that started (or plan to start) reporting at the end of the project. The single project at 120% did not plan to report on success measures until the post project evaluation phase 6 months after the end of the project.

The quality of the answers to the question posed, and the wide variation in performance reporting start points indicates that there is no widely recognised best practice in the deployment of performance reporting regimes.

3.6 General Observations

3.6.1 Problems with Performance Measure Definitions

In responding to the request for performance measure definitions, 30% of organisations mixed descriptions of what the system **is** (e.g. a single system with a consistent look and feel) and what the system is designed to **achieve** (e.g. reduction in the learning time for new users). The remaining majority of responses demonstrated an understanding of performance measures being used to assess achievements, even though not all demonstrated an understanding of how to express measures that could be used meaningfully with numbers.

3.6.2 Baselining

Baselining is the process of measuring the current levels of performance before the project implements an improvement. Baselining should be a key element of any change programme as without a known current state, target setting and planning is largely hypothetical and the degree of improvement achieved later is impossible to quantify with any degree of assurance.

Evidence from the responses suggested that only a few organisations had undertaken baselining. The use of the future tense in many of the responses (e.g. "...will include measures of...") indicated that scales of measurement had yet to be defined and that measurements of the current state had probably not been made. As no direct information on baselining was sought in the survey, no formal results are available but the use of the future tense where baselining or measurement was mentioned in responses indicated that at least 65% of projects had not conducted any measurements to date.

3.6.3 Quantitative Understanding

We assessed that about 25% of the organisations providing responses demonstrated a sufficient understanding of quantitative performance measurement to enable them to deploy measurement processes practically and obtain numerical data for monitoring.

4 Summary

4.1 Conclusions

About a quarter of organisations responding to this survey appeared to be deploying a quantitative approach to measuring progress towards success, however:

- 38% of organisations provided no quantifiable means of measuring success. This set of projects would appear to be relying on a successful outcome being determined at some future date, rather than an explicit definition of the business change that is anticipated/expected. Without quantifiable measures, some doubts arise over how accountability for the investment is being handled.
- 43% of organisations provided performance measures that linked to one or more goals of the project. The remainder organisation had no quantitative indication of progress towards business goals. Without this linkage one has to question whether the right things are being measured and reported.
- 48% of projects were assessed to have no quantitative measures that demonstrated impact outside the project/system, i.e. no quantitative measures of business impact. These projects are likely to have difficulty in providing evidence of success that is valued by business stakeholders.
- The approach of incremental delivery of positive business results seems not to have been uniformly adopted. The length of some projects without any quantitative performance measures gives cause for concern in terms of corporately managing these projects towards successful outcomes.

It is worth considering that this analysis approach could be applied to any programme of work expecting to deliver change, not just IT projects.

4.2 Recommendations

The evidence from this survey suggests that there is considerable room for improvement in the way that IT projects specify and use measures of success. If the UK Government wishes to improve performance in this area, the following actions are recommended:

- Provide training in quantitative performance measurement and analysis techniques.
- Review with OGC whether the Gateway review process is assessing the deployment of performance measurement within projects.
- Monitor and review current success measures for all major projects within each organisation as a means to drive local improvements.
- Promote and develop performance assessment best practice guidance for individual organisations/departments that is appropriate to their individual needs.

Annex A Organisations Surveyed

The performance of the government departments and agencies in meeting the requirements of the FOI Act was not the purpose of this research. The performance was varied however and the data is recorded here for general interest. Most enquires were submitted electronically via email or web forms, but two had to be sent by post as an electronic contact point was not readily visible on the organisations' web sites. The organisations from which information was requested are shown in Table 4.

Organisation

DCA
 DCLG
 DCMS
 Defra
 DfES
 DfID
 DfT
 DH
 DTI
 DWP
 EA
 e-Gov Unit
 HA
 HMRC
 HMT
 HO
 HoC
 LR
 Met Office
 MOD
 NAO
 NHSCfH
 NIO
 OS
 RPA
 TNA
 UKPS
 VOSA
 WA

Table 4 – Organisations Surveyed

Under the FOI Act (2000), public authorities must comply with a request promptly, and should provide the information within 20 working days (around a month). If they need more time, they must write to the person and state when they will be able to answer the request, and why they need more time. The variation in the time from submitting the RFI to receiving a response is shown in Figure 7.

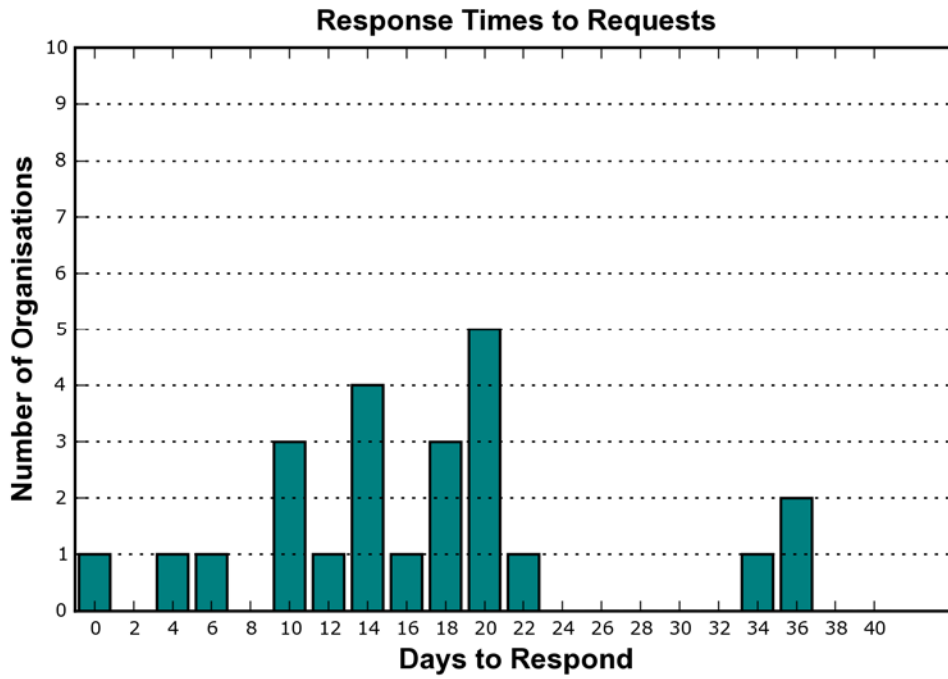


Figure 7 – FOI Response Times