***The paradox of success and failure: Challenges in a complex, project-based world***

Continuing our series of articles looking at some of challenges effecting businesses, **Moon Executive Search talks to Svetlana Cicmil,** Director of Doctoral Research in Business and Law at UWE, about the paradox of success and failure in the context of modern businesses where so much of the work undertaken by employees is project-based and the very notion of success or failure can impact on both company and employee productivity and well-being.

*‘Most [IT] projects fail; it is just a question of how much failure can still be deemed a success’* [[Cadle and Yeates (2001)](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5613/2e7a7bb6ccc6b9a26d8fde89d68fa0c18c9d.pdf)]

The binary notions of success and failure govern much of the way that we (as individuals and organisations) approach, experience and evaluate our work. Yet, how adequate is the traditional narrative of success and failure? Does it enable or hinder the pursuit of constructive, fulfilling work?

The consequences of us, as individuals and organisations, constantly evaluating our actions and achievements as binary outcomes can be long-lasting, and include anxiety and insecurity, professional penalties, and loss of direction. Moreover, these designations of success and failure make us lose our ability to sensitivity, holistically and constructively reflect on our activities and organisational purpose in a wider social context.

Take the example of the IT industry, which is famous both for its failures at the project level, and for its success at the industry level:

*“Massive failure rates have never threatened the advance of IT; quite the contrary, high-risk and prone-to-fail projects nearly always characterize leading edge industries. Failure in this sense is the price of success.”* (Sauer, 1999, quoted in [Fincham, 2002, p.2](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-8551.00219&sa=D&ust=1577716959902000&usg=AFQjCNFd5dgXQmqfyDwQup81pCm9r3sBag))

Not only does this demonstrate how so-called ‘failure’ is required for innovation, it is also clear that attributions of failure and success depend on who judges, at which point in time, and at which level of activity. Failure and success are interrelated in an elusive way.

In this piece, we will draw on insights from studies on project-based work to examine the elusive nature of the fixed categories of success and failure, to illuminate the multiple (sometimes conflicting) judgments of success and failure that are simultaneously at play, and to encourage a more critical and complex approach to coping with this dilemma in everyday working life.

The focus on project-based work stems from our increasingly project-intensive (projectified) lives. The challenges of navigating success and failure, as many readers will recognise from experience, are even more pronounced in projecified organisation settings. Projectification, as a societal and economic phenomenon, [has been defined](http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.493.840&rep=rep1&type=pdf) as a tendency to manage and organise all sorts of activities by projects and to make sense of everyday work and tasks in terms of projects.

Consequently, many of us professionals and managers, are working and making decisions within organising principles of ‘matrix structures’. The theoretical justification of ‘matrix structures’ is that they support an effective and efficient utilisation of an organisation’s resources, creating the capacity to simultaneously run multiple projects. A [well-researched syndrome](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2015.10.002) of ‘[Project overload’](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0018726713520022) in such environments includes the pressures and anxieties caused by the simultaneous existence of multiple, mutually-exclusive, but complexly interrelated, criteria for evaluating performance of each of the projects we are simultaneously involved in at any point in time. These come from a variety of viewpoints, from project team members to project promoters, clients to users, project managers to departments etc.

Furthermore, projectification is not exclusive to work; we increasingly live our ordinary lives and set our personal ambitions and hopes in terms of projects with criteria for success and failure, and are affected by the same consequences of designating outcomes in those terms.

**Success and Failure in Project-based work**

Projects are driven by ambitions. They are generally initiated and approved with the assumption and hope that they are going to improve a currently unsatisfactory state. Multiple parties participate in project initiation and delivery: project team members, project promoters, clients, users, project managers, etc. They will make sense of, and engage with the project on the basis of the expected benefits to them from the successful delivery of the project. These ambitions and expectations, both in terms of the experience of being part of the project as well as its outcomes, can be irreconcilable.

In a typical project, the following judgments of outcomes could be simultaneously at play: Business / commercial success and future financial potential; Quality of the project’s outcome/deliverable (to specification or not); Efficient delivery (within the planned / allocated time and budget); Minimal Environmental Impact; Health and safety; Managerial and organizational implications (potential for future projects, the fit with corporate culture or values…); Personal growth (satisfaction of project team members in terms of individual interest, challenges, and professional and personal development; career); Technical innovation (new knowledge; innovative solutions to unexpected problems); Project close-down (no litigation; absence of post-project problems).

These multiple, and sometimes conflicting, sources of judgments are even more pronounced in a global competitive context - an environment of dense interconnectedness, interdependency and interaction among ‘strangers’ (that is, among individuals and groups from radically different parts of the world, with different traditions, cultures, values and practices) who find themselves working together on a project.

In such contexts, project interactions become even more complex and unpredictable. Due to the inherent characteristics of human relating, outcomes of collaboration (e.g. the decisions made about the project’s direction, agendas pursued, emergent new expectations, novel knowledge, evolving ways of working, etc.) cannot always be known and accurately planned for. Moreover, it is often impossible to precisely define something that has never been delivered before.

We tend to believe that more control equals more success. By linking failure with not executing the plan, we attempt to force all changes into our pre-defined plan in order to meet certain criteria for success which may no longer be relevant or valuable as our project develops.

This results in a conflict of equivocal expectations, priorities and key performance indicators (KPI). As the project unfolds, unforeseen events occur, new knowledge and understanding emerges, and new attractive possibilities may become tempting, causing struggles with trade-offs, prioritisation and varying re-examinations of the project’s original goal and vision. Any new decision made on these bases will affect the quality of collaboration among project participants which ultimately relies on maintaining collective shared sense of purpose and motivation.

Traditional approaches to project control, risk management and evaluation of outcomes are inadequate in these contexts. A [growing school of thought](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1468005x) suggests that over the project’s lifetime, [it is the original plan itself](https://www.macmillanihe.com/page/detail/Making-Projects-Critical/?K=9781403940858) that should be constantly tested against the concrete reality of the project as it is implemented, rather than *vice versa.*

The challenge is finding a way to negotiate and agree among the project’s participants the key criteria: a KPI against which any changes to the plan, trade-offs and any redefinitions of the original goal and specification will be tested and evaluated.

**Ideas for Living with the Success-Failure Dilemma**

To see the picture more clearly, it may be helpful to consider the experience of success and failure as an interplay between the following three elements: (1) unpredictability, flux and change across time and space; (2) the multiple, often ambiguous criteria for qualifying something as a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’ and (3) Ambition and expectations;

**Ambition and expectations**

**Unpredictability, flux and change across time and space: nothing stays the same**

**Evaluation of Outcomes – criteria, perceptions, judgement**

**Figure 1**

It is clear we need to reframe our notions of success and failure, and abandon the implicit belief that they are polarised, discrete, fixed states. Once we let go of the finality and perceived objectivity of the designations, we need to ask ourselves, as individuals and organisations, what really matters to us for a fulfilling and meaningful working life amid multiple projects.

Firstly, we need to review ambitions driving each project, including our own personal endeavours, in a more reflexive, caring and satisfying manner. This particularly requires awareness of the need to navigate the unknown on the path in front of us. Responsible reflection on one’s ambition means avoiding negligence and reckless risk-taking that may negatively impact others, but also ourselves in the long term.

Secondly, failure is often tied up with a feeling of having disappointed someone or oneself. It is always worth asking whether this stems from original unrealistic expectations. We should reflect critically on the role of psychological phenomenon element called “optimism bias” – ask for an objective opinion of a critical friend about how realistic your plan is; do not discard previous experiences as irrelevant with a conviction you’ll do better this time – take the time to consult and check.

We should not be too hard on ourselves, nor on others. Not reaching a predetermined goal is an aspect of actively living, continuously developing as a citizen of the global community and learning to cope with the paradox of simultaneously knowing and not knowing what to do; being and not being in control [while turning the ensuing anxiety into constructive thought and action](https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/884996). If we have deviated from a plan, we have not failed as long as we have been open-minded and critically reflexive, and collaborative about what new opportunities this might bring.

Finally, there are lessons for leadership and organisational development. It should be an institutional responsibility to introduce systemic changes which acknowledge the complexity of project-based work. For example: incorporating regular critical re-considerations of established processes and approaches to collaboration under the conditions of uncertainty; agreeing and renegotiating project performance indicators, and introducing a high level of accountability, responsibility and transparency in decision-making may reduce vulnerability from project overload.

By considering the experience of success and failure in the context of increasingly globalised, complex and project-based work, we find that the success-failure binary is not only too simplistic, but is actively harmful to the pursuit of what really matters to us as organisations and individuals. Rather than considering success as something desirable and failure as a pathology to be eradicated, we should consider them in a complex relational way. The key questions should move from ‘Why did this fail?’ to ‘What was achieved?’ and ‘What can be learned from this?’.