

A NEW ERA IN PROJECT CONTROLS

BY ARAMIS BANUET

The single most wonderful gift we humans have received is the mind. It gives us the ability to continually learn and improve, to create, and to feel the need for responsibility and accountability. Current global trends—such as the “Green Revolution,” business-focused governance (e.g. through project controls), and the defining of best practices—demonstrate that the soul has begun to speak to the business world and ask for accountability beyond mere dollars and cents.

There are all sorts of intangible or hard-to-quantify factors that can mean the difference between life and death for a business: employee morale, the emergence of new technologies, changes in the competitive landscape, and evolution in customer tastes, to name a few. A misplaced confidence in numbers should not be the determining factor in our business decisions.

With advancements in technological systems, such as business information management (BIM) applications, 4-D and 5-D scheduling, powerful data-crunching tools, and open-ended project management information systems, organizations must protect themselves from the misinterpretation of data. But how can this be accomplished? How can companies verify that the data going into a dashboard is complete? And, why do firms place so much trust in executive dashboard reporting in the first place?

As humans thirsting for knowledge, we look for commonalities. We study the patterns and eliminate the lowest common denominators. As a result of our studies, we have come to a crossroads where individual creativity and ingenuity have harnessed the power of years of project management, manifesting it into a new path of best practices. Scheduling, estimating and budgeting have been broadly combined with new technologies that, supposedly, integrate information to allow project managers to create models, thus basing important technical decisions on the probabilities extracted from such systems.

But who is managing and watching these systems? The ever-changing worlds of technology and business have created the need to re-think and re-invent the idea of best practices and to incorporate them into processes. As a result, I have given up on the term “best practices” all together.

Project controls defined

Project controls are the tools used by management to plan objectives, track organizations and responsibilities, provide substance to the implementation process, report the status and variances to assist management in its control and, if necessary, project re-planning.

The simple notice that has slipped everyone’s attention regarding project management principles, standards and practices is clear. Everything looks fine on paper, but in the real world—down in the trenches—it is a completely different beast. This has happened because, although we have best practices, we hardly ever use them. Project managers still rely on gut instinct. They are creative artists. The project management discipline everyone has been trained to focus on—professional and practical scope, time, cost, quality, human resources, communications, risk, and procurement management—coordinated through the practice of Integration Management, is all put on the responsibility of the project manager. The activities that he or she is ultimately responsible for are scope, time and cost. The other functions have been left to wither, since there is often no time available to document the successes and failures of a project while it is still ongoing.

Most organizations that recognize project controls as a specific job role are typically working under a project manager who either reports to a centralized project office

Typical project control functions

- Educating the team on project management processes
- Facilitating and overseeing planning/control sessions
- Developing the project schedule and breakdown structure
- Managing the critical path to ensure schedules are met
- Estimating project costs
- Tracking and analyzing project costs
- Managing the process of issue, risk and change control
- Documenting and delivering project status information

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or to specific departments within the organization. More often than not, the project controls team is also tasked with making sure project management information systems are installed, updated and maintained.

A holistic approach to project controls

A well-trained project controls team can support the project manager by aligning a path of efficiency that allows a project manager the time needed to creatively find ways to meet their project objectives. This requires trust from the project management team. In the project management/construction management/design management eco-system, the project controls team can facilitate the interactions that occur between organizations, between generations, between languages, and between cultures. Without strengthening or actively listening to this function, the project and the entire organization are vulnerable to a collapse. To quell any disruptive effects caused by these interactions, project controls must constantly be evolving to meet the demands created by an increasingly complex business world.

Key skill sets needed by members of a project controls team have gone beyond the traditional functions we have come to accept as the norm. Project controls specialists have been tasked with learning and making applications to best fit the situation at hand. Project management has insisted on defining best practices. At the heart of these practices and in the development of new technology, they have created a new approach to the support functions that are currently in demand.

How then do we put ourselves in a frame of mind where we can receive inspiration when it comes to project controls? How can we cultivate and foster the growth of our individual leaders and harness that ingenuity to benefit not only our organization, but also the project controls community as a whole?

Key skills that project controls team members must possess include:

They immerse themselves in their subjects. This means a good working understanding of how each business activity fits into the overall business, how the work in each activity is performed, and what the cost and profit factors are.

They collaborate and communicate effectively. Complexity can be handled more easily if groups of

people from project management, IT and business units work together, bringing their complementary skills to bear on a problem. Coordinating a process of interrelated functions that are neither totally random nor rigidly predetermined, but are dynamic as the process evolves and can be duplicated strategically and effectively, is a task that involves the entire business organization.

They play with different ideas. Creativity and flexibility with current methods and systems allows the playful controls specialist to marry existing thoughts and ideas with a calm and artistic flair to benefit the whole team. At the same time, they must have the time and encouragement to create, test and implement new technologies.

They recognize patterns. It is important for controls specialists to identify management and supportive functions in an organization and then examine each in detail. They are constantly realigning and rethinking every step to assure reliability.

They are innovative thinkers. A good project controls team member is able to construct a framework where the laws of technology and communication can be combined rather than divided. They push the boundaries of business into a new era of data management and control while applying the processes of interrelated functions to the appropriate software package(s).

Hopefully this knowledge can transcend established cultures to transpose and intersect businesses that were once thought to be completely opposite in nature, product or service. More importantly, I hope this knowledge will have an impact on business organizations and encourage them to honestly evaluate their own controls and data management by looking beyond the dashboard. Then we can take a closer look at ourselves and ask, “How does my work actually help my company grow?”

About the author

Aramis Banuet is a PinnacleOne Project Controls Specialist with over eight years of experience tracking and reporting costs in construction projects ranging from airport terminals and runways to schools.