

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

The real reason your project doesn't go to plan

OPINION STRATEGY SYSTEMS THINKING

SUE UNERMAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER 02 MAY 2018

The real reason your project doesn't go to plan

A great plan is crucial to progress. Whether it is a plan for your marketing ambitions, a plan to transform the sector, a media plan or a career plan, great understanding and a logical solution are essential for success.

But a great plan isn't enough. As Mike Tyson said: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

None of us expect to get punched in the office. But a great plan might still go astray – not due to random violence, not even due to an unexpected turn of events. It might be because of the bottleneck.

Bottlenecks turn up in all kinds of situations. They might be hidden, or it may be impossible to predict how much impact they'll have. If you don't find the bottleneck the plan might fail.

The term bottleneck is easy to visualise in theory of course, but often difficult to identify.

The term is an engineering one and refers to the component that limits the performance of a larger system, e.g. the slowest step in the assembly line in car manufacturing.

Strategy experts Sull and Eisenhardt think that exposing the bottleneck takes proper analysis and real data. Take their case study of Grupo Multimedia, a Mexican videoconferencing provider, which analysed its processes to see what was leading to disappointing sales. The managers of the business were shocked to learn that more than 70% of projects were stuck in the design stage, waiting for engineers to create customised proposals for each customer. Not only were the design engineers stretched too thinly, the carefully customised proposals weren't converting that well. Only one in six resulted in a sale. With this evidence the management were able to try a more agile approach, with more off the shelf solutions delivered faster.

Often activities that require coordination across different departments, as in a media agency or media owner, can be subject to hidden bottlenecks. The finance team, sales or buying teams and client service teams will have different objectives and distinct ways of working. The departments can end up spending time redesigning processes that subsequently have the same old bottlenecks unless these are identified and solved.

Data is important in the search for the bottleneck, as in the case of the stats in the Grupo Multimedia example, and this can apply to your personal life as well.

If you're trying to make a personal change, maybe eating more healthily, drinking less or exercising more, Sull and Eisenhardt suggest a diary of what you are up to and when can make your personal bottleneck obvious, which then means you're closer to solving it.

Personal projects or professional plans need data, evidence and honesty to uncover the bottleneck. If your plan isn't going to plan, start investing time in looking for the place or time where it's getting stuck before you rip it up and start again.

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