

The Project Assassin's Guide

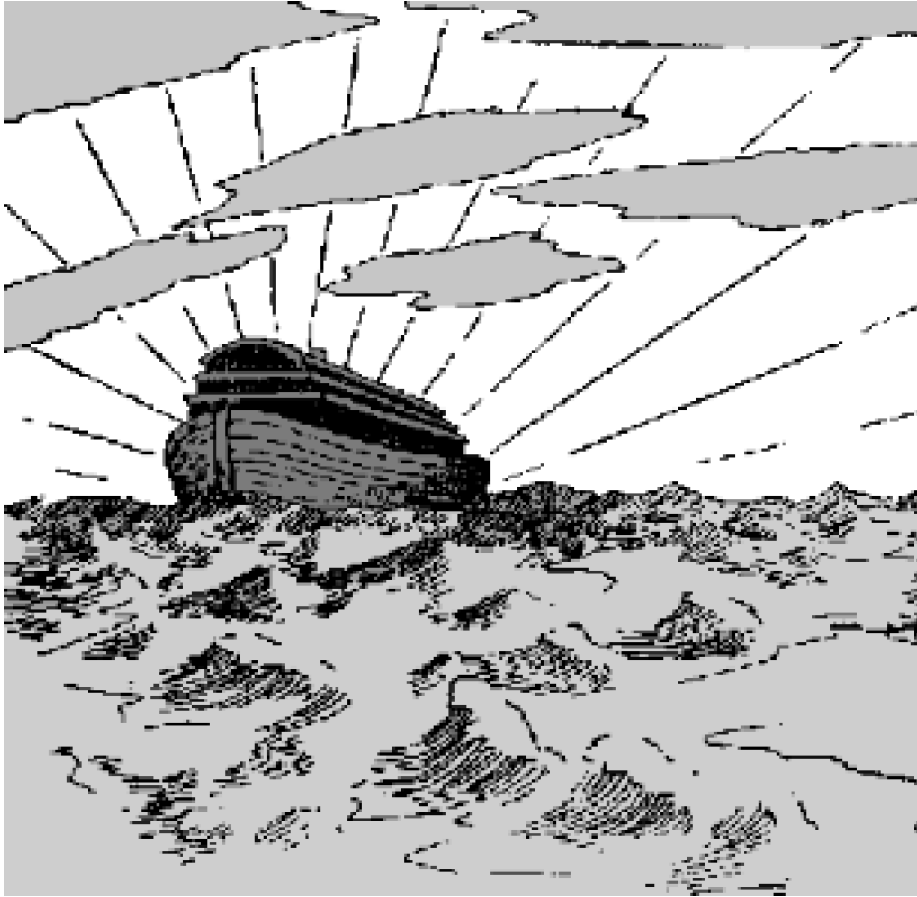
**How to Murder a Project
Without Getting Caught**



Copyright (c) 2006

Project Doctors and its licensors.

All rights reserved.



This final example illustrates two important truths:

1. Don't underestimate the importance of the Sponsor / Project Manager relationship.
2. You must accept that you won't always succeed.

But don't fail too often as you could get left out in the rain.

Contents

Background

Preface
Introduction
An Historical Perspective
Why Murder a Project?
Dead or "Living Dead"?

Strategies

Preventing Sponsorship
Hiding Value
Sabotaging Business Change
Avoiding Risk
Obfuscating Requirements
Championing Quality

Conclusion and Exercises

Summary
Exercises: Motivation
Exercises: Field Testing
Answers to Exercises

Acknowledgements

Whilst I should like to acknowledge all those who have contributed to this “Body of Knowledge”, I suspect that they would be less keen to be named. Suffice it to say that I am deeply indebted to them.

Beached Boat?

This one is interesting. There seems to be some clear evidence of the Project Assassin’s hand at work...

- No project board
- End date not agreed
- No Change Control or Configuration Management
- No involvement from potential “end-users”

Yet there are also things which seem to prevent these ploys taking effect...

- Powerful Sponsor
- Exact detailed specification
- Good monitoring and quality control processes
- No change anticipated
- Mandated use

Was the Project Assassin successful? The problem is that there is a good Sponsor, a good Project Manager, and a good relationship between the two of them. The distinction in roles is well understood and so is the relationship between them. Both play their parts well.

Under such circumstances, the Project Assassin stands little or no chance. Which in this case is just as well...

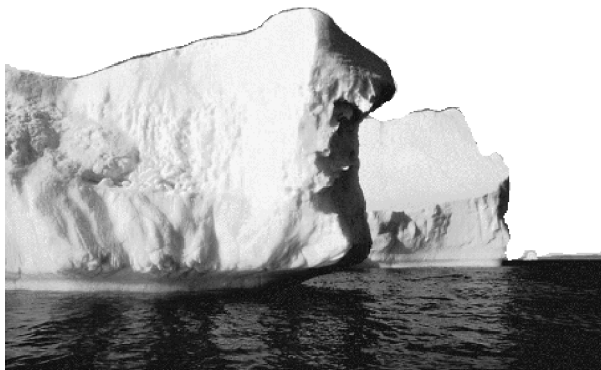
...or we wouldn’t be here today! (Genesis 7:23)

“All functions represented on Steering Committee” and “Mandated use”

This is another subtle one. Mandating the use of a new Quality Management System at first sight seems essential. Fortunately, here it has been done without adequate prior involvement of those who will be affected. Functional representation on the steering committee is an excellent way of getting notional involvement: the Director of Supply will obviously have enough time to keep up to speed with, for instance, IT methods such as code generation, XP, prototyping, etc. and the documentation challenges that each of these present. Or, at least, it will take guts to tell him that his knowledge is lacking in these areas.

Training, support, etc. also look like they are being repressed.

Titanic seems to be heading for the iceberg.



Preface

The publication of this work is another sad sign of the way in which standards have fallen since my days. It would have been inconceivable then for a publisher dedicated to the promotion of project management to have lowered itself to these depths.

I cannot stress strongly enough my distaste for this book, which seeks only to increase the already regrettably high rate of project failure. Do not be misled: by following the guidance within these pages you will hasten the demise of many a fine project.

If you have been unfortunate enough to purchase this book, ignore the advice contained herein. If you have borrowed it, then give it back unread. Do NOT, under any circumstances, show it to anyone who shows even the slightest discontent with their project.

If I cannot dissuade you from reading further, be warned. Your mental health could be seriously damaged by its perverted logic. You may end up not knowing whether you are acting in the best interests of your project or whether you too have been recruited to the shadowy realms of the Project Assassin.

Charles Willbe

Project Doctors

You have been warned !

Questionable Quality

“Co-sponsored by Director of Supply, Director of Development and CIO”

The first sign is fairly obvious, but the use of very senior people can mask it. It is much easier working with senior management than with people who have the time to fully understand sponsorship. It is also tremendously effective because, once instituted, it is almost impossible to back away from without someone losing face. People at this level are never inclined to do that.



“Precise estimates of resources and dates”

This second is far subtler. Precision is often asked for so giving it, however meaningless the numbers, is unlikely to attract suspicion.

The main problem with this tactic is that of subsequent blame. When risks do mature to affect delivery, costs will rise, schedules will slip, and the Project Manager will catch the blame. This is not therefore a good weapon for a Project Assassin in the Project Manager role; it works a treat for those in Finance though!



“Project documentation and progress reporting done electronically using intranet to which all managers have access”

This one is perhaps a little subtler. The use of the intranet suggests an openness that best practice project management would commend. The secret is in the limited access. Those who need to contribute, the people who will be at the sharp end, are kept out, whilst those who think they need to contribute are given free rein.

“Current way of requesting new requirements via intranet” and “Delivery due in two months ”

The combination of these last two bullets is what makes them poisonous. With only two months to go, new requirements are the last thing that a project needs. This factor is probably not enough to create havoc alone, but it does play a useful role as “another nail in the coffin”.



Introduction

There is a general misapprehension that all those involved in projects wish them to succeed. A moment's thought or a brief consideration of human nature shows how improbable that is.

Projects change things but people don't like change. Why then should people like projects? Of course, there is a difference between casual dislike and being prepared to take action against something. But with the numbers of people involved in or affected by a project, is it likely that everyone will be fully behind what the project is trying to accomplish? Given the impact that a project may have on working practices, staffing levels, power, etc. isn't it probable that someone will be prepared to take action?

The high rate of project failure is not accidental. For IT projects it has remained fixed at about 75% for roughly the last decade¹ and now other sectors are beginning to admit² that their failure rates are similar. Such consistently high failure rates are surely evidence for intelligent intervention.

Doubtless Sherlock Holmes would have detected the hand of Moriarty at work, but this is surely too great an achievement for any one man and his fictional status is a serious drawback.



¹ The Standish Group Report, 1995 and subsequent updates

² But not very loudly

I am more inclined to follow the logic of those who doubt that man ever landed on the moon and, more pertinently, suspect CIA involvement in the death of John F Kennedy. For me there is little doubt that Project Assassins are at work in many projects today.

Others have noted that certain trades that are normally exercised independently and largely invisibly must actually have some sort of professional support or they would long ago have ceased to exist. Trainees in these well known yet unrecognised professions must receive instruction to prepare them for their chosen career.

It has come to my notice, however, that the Project Assassin is currently without any such professional support and must fend for himself. It is this sad omission which this Guide seeks to rectify.

People hate change

Consider attempts to divert drivers away from their favourite shortcut in order to reduce noise in a residential area.

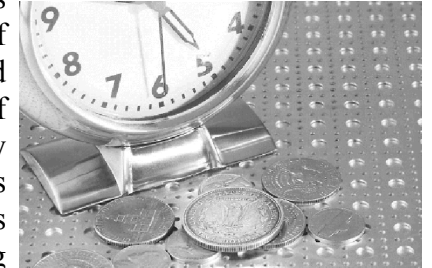
Do people meekly follow the new, longer route or do they seek to cut back onto it at the first opportunity?

Wonky Wotevres?

You should have spotted the following four telltale signs of lethal intentions.

“Sponsored by R&D director”

All sorts of opportunities for mayhem open up from this clever selection of Sponsor. As the provider, he is much more likely to be concerned with costs than benefits, so there are real chances of either the lack of value being exposed and the project being cancelled or, if preferred, the delivery of a virtually valueless product that then needs constant attention to milk any benefits from it. There are also exciting possibilities for making this a “technology project”: one where the project team get so enthusiastic about the means of production that deliverables are entirely forgotten. These are great fun to work on as they avoid the hassle of delivery.



“Production, marketing and sales costs all factored in”

But where are development costs? You should have spotted our old friend: free internal resources. Depending on how this is played, this could strangle the project at birth or just extend it almost infinitely.

Answers to Exercises Field Testing

An Historical Perspective

Before describing the tools and techniques of this honourable trade, its long and noble history deserves attention. As a profession, its history is somewhat shorter than that of the “oldest profession”, but its origins go back further than might be thought.

An ancient profession

An early practitioner was the genius who used the “auto-scheduling” function of his project management software to ensure that the roofs of ancient temples were built before the walls.



Anyone who has been involved in software development will have come across the “swing” where the original requirement is changed successively by those involved in the analysis, design, coding, testing, implementation, etc., into something beautifully useless.



I suspect those from many other fields of human endeavour will recognise the transition involved. It is only recently that the distinguished history of this particular technique for killing projects has been recognised.



The exquisitely crafted scope creep, giving the “tri-seater” model is particularly noteworthy.

A thriving profession

Although it is an ancient profession, it is nevertheless a thriving profession. The effectiveness of project assassination cannot be doubted given the high rate of project failure consistently achieved over the last decade.

Despite the best efforts of some to claim success for projects that deliver little or no value to anybody, the

handiwork of the Project Assassin can be seen all around us.

Removed, pending legal action

The XTRA project - might Demelza hasten a demise?

Demelza’s career has been built on the success of the X2 and it has served the company very well. The way she brought it to market has clearly resulted in the greatest respect for her abilities, but now she is being asked to help kill it off. The entirely professional way in which she is conducting herself not only provokes huge sympathy for her, but also provides excellent cover for nefarious activities, if she so chooses. It seems likely that she might.

1. Most obviously, what she did with the X2 is now likely to be forgotten
2. Her reputation as a leader is likely to diminish
3. If this new product isn’t up to scratch, her involvement in the new project will tarnish that reputation
4. It may even be bad for the company. It is important to remember that some Project Assassins are driven by the rather strange idea that employees should work for the company’s prosperity. We should not allow the distasteful nature of this idea to blind us to its presence in a small percentage of people.



Improved sales

- might Claude consider continuing?

Are contractors ever Project Assassins? Claude might well be.



1. His contract will finish and the money will stop coming in. This is perhaps the purest of the Project Assassins' motives.
2. He will lose a pleasant working environment.
3. The respect that he has built up to date, based on his previous successes, will be lost.
4. It will involve moving from the known to the unknown, which few relish.
5. Claude may be concerned that he might not be able to make as much of a contribution in his next role. Although such modesty is not a defining characteristic of consultants / contractors, the possibility should not be excluded.

Progress in our chosen art has even been acknowledged by government, whose efforts to promote good project management pose some threats.

A discrete profession

By its nature the profession of the Project Assassin must be discrete. As such many are unaware of its existence and such denial brings considerable advantages. Project Assassins have much in common with the security services. Once identities are known, effectiveness is compromised and survival may be put at risk.

A maturing profession

It is also a maturing profession and as such a difficult balance must be maintained between recognition and ... well ... recognition.

The move from gifted amateur to recognised professional will undoubtedly be assisted by new qualifications being developed by our Institute. Their details, of course, cannot be disclosed but a spectrum of qualifications is envisaged from "Quite Unintentional" through "Casual" and "Routine" to "Premeditated".



Ultimately, that nirvana of professionalism will be sought for the Project Assassin: chartered status.

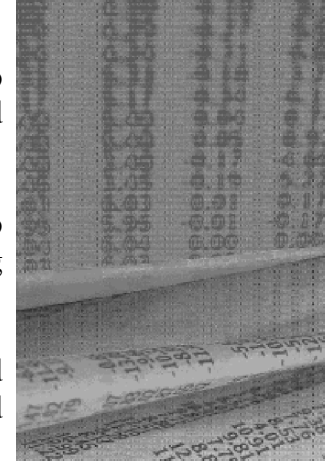


Before anyone can proudly bear the initials “C. Proj. Ass.” or even the lesser qualifications of QUIPA, CIPA, RIPA and PIPA, a recognized Body of Knowledge must be produced to embody³ “best practice”; hence “The Project Assassin’s Guide” or PABoK as it will doubtless become known.

BEANS for Finance ***– might Beatrice bury the BEANS?***

Beatrice may indeed be motivated to stop this project delivering.

1. If her logic was not quite as good as she convinced others it was, then she has no wish for that to be exposed.
2. It could be embarrassing if she has no way of getting the data which would confirm the improvement.
3. It is rather comfortable getting others to do the work but soon the focus is going to switch to her.
4. Worse than that, she is going to be held accountable for delivering the claimed benefits of this work.
5. We all know how popular change is and, if this succeeds, then she will be blamed for all the change that will follow.
6. When it all goes wrong, the buck will stop with her.



The RESTORE project – might Arthur be an Assassin?

There are several indications that Arthur might be or become a Project Assassin



1. Few of us like making staff redundant and yet, if this project succeeds, that is what Arthur will have to do.
2. Even worse, it might be him that is made redundant!
3. If this project has been justified on the basis of cost savings, he is likely to have his budget cut.
4. If, on the other hand, it was justified on the basis of quicker filling of orders or some other increase in performance, then he has now got to deliver that.
5. The mystique that had previously surrounded finding items in the stores will evaporate, meaning that his hold over people will be reduced. Knowledge is power.
6. All those excuses for failing to fill orders, etc. will evaporate, whether or not they are still (or ever were) valid.

Why Murder a Project?

Project Assassins are masters of disguise and may exercise their profession from a variety of different roles on a project. They are also driven by a wide variety of motives.

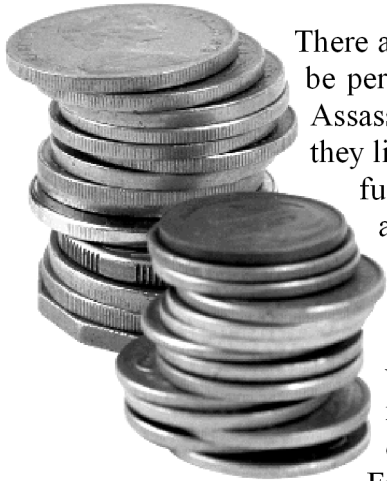
Different people

High profile roles such as Sponsor or Senior Responsible Owner present unique challenges in terms of concealment but unique opportunities for plying our trade. Many have succeeded in occupying these roles on projects of all sizes. Some have distinguished themselves in the damage they have rendered to projects whilst continuing to draw their salaries. The most expert have managed to gain promotions despite their efforts; their artistry is to be admired.



On the other hand, the relatively lowly role of the intended user of what the project is producing should not be despised. Although the range of weapons that can be used is more limited, they can be used with greater abandon as these roles have a much lower profile and the need for concealment is correspondingly less.

The Project Assassin can successfully lurk within the project team and is not infrequently the Project Manager himself. Many varied opportunities present themselves but these must be used with great care as the blame for project demise is normally laid at the door of the project team. For this reason, most of these assassinations are of the type where the death of the project is only discovered several months or years after all meaningful life has been extinguished.



There are also a number of roles which appear to be peripheral to a project but which the Project Assassin can assume very effectively. Because they lie outside project structures, they can often furnish opportunities for multiple assassination attempts on different projects. Such roles include Head of Operations, Chief Information Officer, Director of Quality Assurance, Chief Executive, various middle management roles responsible for resource provision and, quintessentially, any number of roles in Finance.

Various motives

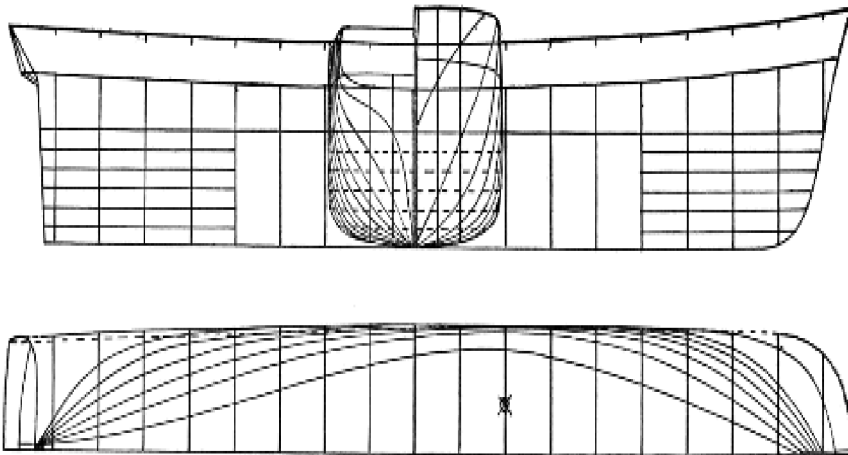
The motives of Project Assassins in these roles vary widely and an historical study of their origins is of less help here.

Answers to Exercises Motivation

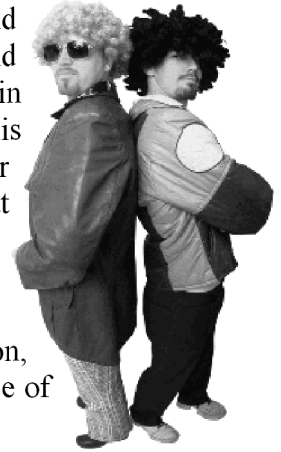
Beached Boat?

A one-man maritime construction and launch project to build a large vessel 50 miles from the coast.

- Powerful Sponsor
- No project board
- Exact detailed specification
- End date not agreed
- Good monitoring and quality control processes
- No Change Control or Configuration Management
- No change anticipated
- No involvement from potential “end-users”
- Mandated use



It is widely believed that Assassins in the 12th and 13th centuries were driven by their political and religious aims, but their lack of discrimination in killing both Muslims and Crusaders suggests that this may not be correct. The explanation that their “diet”⁴ may have caused them to become somewhat confused sounds somewhat far-fetched for any who lived through the '60s.



Given the subsequent development of the profession, monetary inducements seem a far more likely cause of their behaviour.

Unfortunately, Project Assassins are not like those Assassins practicing in “other sectors”. Everything would be so much easier if financial motives did always predominate. In practice things are rather more complicated and students will find the exercise “Motivation” (to be found towards the end of this book) helpful in gaining greater insight into the variety of motives that actually inspire Project Assassins. It is recommended that this exercise is completed and self-marked before reading further.

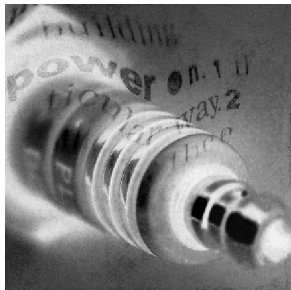
Individuals are recruited as Project Assassins for a whole variety of reasons including job preservation, power, performance, accountability, blame, popularity and even altruism.

Job preservation



Strangely, some enter the profession because they are squeamish about the effects of projects on people. The idea that a successful project may result in “down-sizing”, “staff level optimisation”, “operational excellence” or any of the other euphemisms for redundancies⁵ is somehow unpalatable to them. Where the “headcount reduction” or “more effective use of contractors” involves them personally, their motivation is much more intelligible.

Power



It is far easier to understand how the loss of power that may accompany project delivery may encourage recruits to the Project Assassin ranks. Those who have held the power of life or death over a project will appreciate the motives of those driven by loss of financial power from budgets being reduced; loss of staff empire from similar reductions in headcount; loss of reputation as expertise and experience are replaced or made irrelevant; or loss of status resulting from organisational change.

Performance

Performance itself is rarely a motive for the Project Assassin. By contrast, covering up for a lack of

⁵ A small industry could be founded to produce new descriptions for this process with perhaps an awards ceremony for the greatest abuse of the English language. “Creating opportunities for investment” and “dynamic resource balancing” are surely worthy of the short-list.

Questionable Quality?

A cross-functional project to harmonise the approach to Quality Management

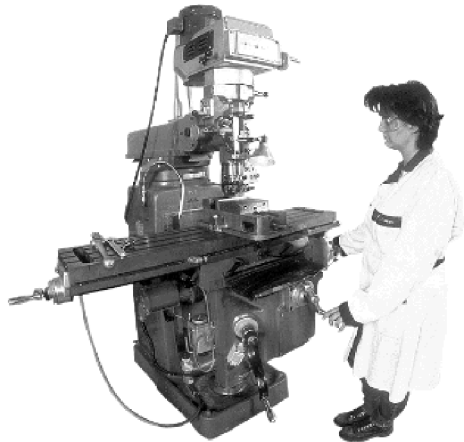
- Co-sponsored by Director of Supply, Director of Development and CIO
- All functions represented on Steering Committee
- Rigorous Change Control & Configuration Management
- Extensive and comprehensive documentation
- Precise estimates of resources and dates
- Mandated use



Wonky Wotevres?

An in-house project for large engineering company to develop the “Wotevre” for sale to its international customer base

- Sponsored by R&D director
- Operations director on project board
- Production, marketing and sales costs all factored in
- Change Control and Configuration Management in place
- Project documentation and progress reporting done electronically using intranet to which all managers have access
- Current way of requesting new requirements via intranet
- Delivery due in two months – apparently on track



performance is one of the commonest drivers. This is particularly true where such a deficiency stretches back over a number of years and is likely to be exposed by new ways of working, new systems, etc.

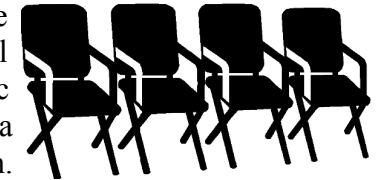
Accountability

A motive frequently evident towards the end of a project is the avoidance of accountability⁶. Projects can be very comfortable for those benefiting from them but when they suddenly find themselves accountable for demonstrating positive outcomes, their comfort rapidly turns to discomfort. If “the proof of the pudding is in the eating” then “the pudding” is much better remaining on the serving plate uneaten. Evidence for the prevalence of this motivation can be found in carefully filed reports, unimplemented software and unused buildings, demonstrating that no one sector has a monopoly on it.



Blame

Closely related to accountability is blame. It is always good to have someone else to take it. Unfortunately, when projects complete the number of options for transferring blame reduce dramatically and, as in a game of Musical Chairs, there is value in keeping the music playing at least until you have found a comfortable seat, preferably in another room.



⁶ “Accountability” should not be confused with “responsibility”. Ambition desires “responsibility” and subsequently requires the avoidance of “accountability” so that the “responsibility” gained is not threatened and the associated benefits of status are not lost.

Popularity

Preserving popularity plays its part in the motive *Job preservation*, described previously, but also provides more widespread inspiration. People do not like change, so those responsible for it are rarely popular. Those for whom popularity is essential may be driven to maintain it at any cost and become useful recruits.

Altruism

Although rather distasteful, it must nevertheless be admitted that altruism may also play its part. Some are persuaded to become Project Assassins by a belief that it is their duty to seek the good of the company. Such unpleasant truth must be faced, not only because such people can be useful accomplices in certain situations but also because their motivation may make them fickle. They lack the single-mindedness produced by the purer motives and may be persuaded that a project is “salvageable” at extremely inconvenient moments.



...and many more

It is left as an exercise for the reader to think of further examples. For instance, what might drive a Project Assassin working on a relocation project to ensure that the new site is uninhabitable?

Exercises – Field Testing

The following exercises test the students’ knowledge of the strategies described in this Guide.

Only a subset of the available information for each project is presented, but this should be enough for the student to be able to detect where the Project Assassin has been at work.

List the interventions.



Answers are given at the end of the book.

Given these examples, students should understand their own desires and objectives; be able to detect others engaged in nefarious activities and be well equipped to recruit new members to the profession.

**Do NOT return
exercises for marking**



Dead or “Living Dead”?

It should now be obvious that there are two major types of assassination, resulting in two types of dead project. Traditionally, a dead project is one that fails to deliver what was intended and is stopped; a “living dead” project fails to deliver what was intended but keeps on running.



Many of the motives described can be drivers for both sorts of assassination. For instance, if *Job preservation* is the motive for the customer of the project, then it may matter little whether the associated project is stopped without enabling the desired job cuts or just continues to run until natural wastage has occurred or the world ends. If *Job preservation* is the motive of a contractor employed by that same project then stopping the project is clearly unacceptable.

Each case is different but as a rule, where continuing work is the aim, “living dead” projects are the means by which that will be accomplished. With a truly professional approach, the experienced Project Assassin can generate several years of ongoing work. Large consultancies have considerable skills in this area. Their achievements should be recognised and their true artistry should be emulated.

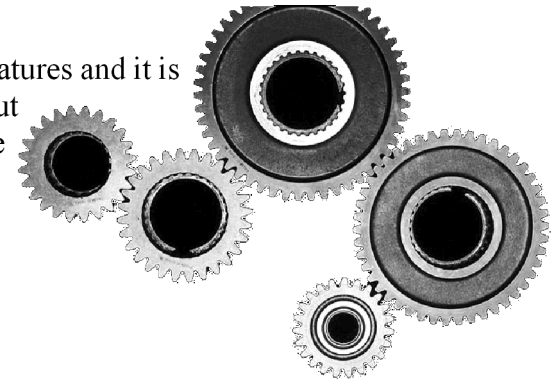


7 As depicted in many horror movies and assorted pop videos

The XTRA (X2 Replacement Activity) project

Demelza is known throughout the company as the woman who doubled sales by bringing the X2 to market. It is still the backbone of the company’s revenue. It has the best reliability record of any combined filling, weighing and safety testing machine used by the high pressure gasses industry. As such, it has made Demelza almost a household name (at least within that sector). In developing its successor, the X3, the new Product Manager was particularly keen to have her on his team. “With you on board Demelza,” he had said “we should easily be able to move the X2 market onto X3s within a year.”

The X3 certainly has more features and it is definitely more “flashy”, but will it prove as reliable as the good old X2?



Improved sales?

Claude is a highly paid “process redesign consultant”, brought in to rectify the problems in the Sales & Marketing division of a major breakfast cereal producer. He has already made a significant contribution by improving communication channels between various departments. There should never again be a repeat of last year’s fiasco, when a sales campaign targeting 20 to 30 year old males coincided with a product re-branding in pink! The major improvements that he had identified in workflow around the organisation are now nearing completion.



There are, of course, some minor changes that might be worth making and the market for process redesign consultants is rather flat at the moment...

With the distinction between dead and “living dead” projects understood, some key strategies can now be considered.



Preventing Sponsorship

Hiding Value

Sabotaging Business Change

Avoiding Risk

Obfuscating Requirements

Championing Quality

Suffocation by Planning

Preventing Sponsorship

One of the most successful weapons in the Project Assassin's armoury and one which can be used either for an outright kill or a "vampire strike" (the creation of a "living dead" project) is the prevention of proper sponsorship. A variety of interesting and successful ways of using this weapon are available.

Disrupt the relationship

Lack of an effective relationship between Sponsor and Project Manager is the number one reason found by many studies that purport to have the prevention of project failure as their aim. If by any of these approaches you disrupt that relationship, you will have guaranteed project failure.

Although to the novice, they may seem very different, very similar effects can be produced.

The underlying principle on which all these approaches are based is that of removing any direction from a project.

The professional will not care how this is achieved.

Whether direction is not set at all, is confused by too many

individuals being "accountable", is set incorrectly, or is changed

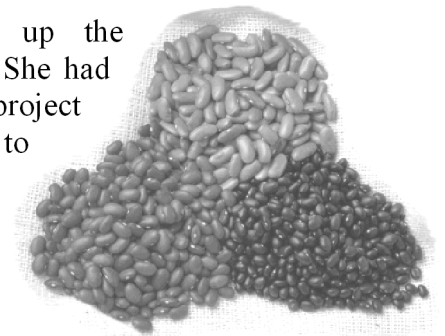
repeatedly is irrelevant as long as the desired

outcome is obtained. Attention, as always, needs to be focused on outcomes. Is the instant demise of this project sought or a meandering continued existence?

BEANS for Finance

Beatrice is Business Change Manager for the BEANS finance system, which the in-house Information Technology group (IT) are implementing to streamline all the routine operations within the Finance department of "Campfire Essentials Ltd.". She isn't sure how she got this role, but it was probably a result of those bright ideas that she had contributed to the business case. The one that she had been particularly proud of was "reduce the annual budgeting cycle by two months", which she had shown could be accomplished if Finance were given appropriate system support. Rather against her expectations, IT were delivering everything that she had said would be necessary. But they had also begun talking about "baseline measurements" and "showing that the claimed improvements have been realised".

Could Finance really speed up the budgeting process that much? She had been so sure when justifying the project and she had certainly managed to convince IT.



The RESTORE project

Arthur is Stores Manager for a mid-size manufacturer of tinted glass products. He has been pushing for the refurbishment of the storehouse for years and now the RESTORE project, which will accomplish just that, is progressing well. The current layout is so poor that some stock is completely inaccessible without moving other materials: the “Glazed Stairs” can’t even be seen without removing the “Rose Tinted Spectacles”. The width of the gangways necessitates manual handling of many items. Indeed, the company’s workload was so heavy a couple of years ago that he was forced to employ three more staff. Orders were increasing rapidly and they just could not fill them quickly enough without extra hands. He wouldn’t have needed those extra hands had this refurbishment been done when he had said it was necessary.



Now growth seems to have stopped and workload is down to reasonable levels again. Life will be easier when they get the new stores, but will he still need those extra staff?

Not having a Sponsor

The simplest expedient is to ensure that there is no Sponsor for a project.

The very simplicity of the approach makes it easy to overlook, yet it has a long and creditable history. It “winds the clock back” to that golden age when the word “Sponsor” was only uttered by charities trying to relieve people of their money⁸. For the Project Assassin working for a company for whom the clock has stopped, this is the method of choice.



Where companies have heard of the concept, they may still be persuaded that “sponsorship”⁹ is just the latest fad introduced by management consultants¹⁰ and will soon be overtaken by the next idea¹¹.

Even when the concept of sponsorship has begun to infect an organisation, this approach often remains effective for “infrastructure projects”. The very use of that phrase convinces people that the project is being

⁸ Sponsorship of various types of animal is still possible but the Dead Horses Flogging Fund was forced to close due to an unsustainable demand for its resources

⁹ Quotation marks can be very useful when trying to ridicule anything which might prolong project survival, but they are used more broadly in this Guide and care should be taken to remove them (and keep a straight face) when dealing with the inherently ridiculous

¹⁰ Where culturally acceptable, spitting at this point will add weight to the argument

¹¹ The use of the word “transatlantic” may further help your argument in organisations resistant to ideas emanating from the United States.



done solely for the benefit of “the infrastructure” and therefore has no need for business sponsorship.

The track record for IT infrastructure projects is excellent and this approach should be equally effective when dealing with physical infrastructure (roads, rail, utility networks, etc.).

One variation on this theme is the identification of an organization as Sponsor. This avoids accountability being taken by any one individual. The probability of “Manufacturing” or “Sales” speaking with one voice is not statistically significant.

Another idea is to associate “Sponsor” with a role. The reasons why this is so effective will be described under ***Changing Sponsor.***

Having multiple sponsors

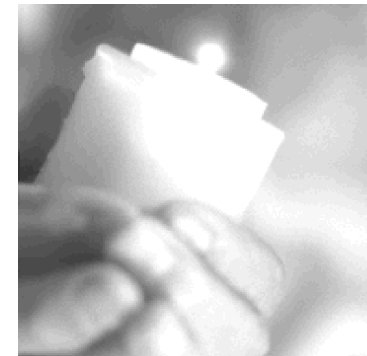
An interesting and highly elegant approach is to ensure multiple Sponsors.

Masquerading as stakeholder involvement, the multiple Sponsor approach also tends to divert any blame for project failure onto the Sponsors. Although this appears to preclude its use by Project Assassins who have the role of Sponsor, any blame can, at worst, be shared with

Exercises - Motivation

It is an abomination to kill a project without understanding why you are doing it. Project Assassination is an art form, only to be undertaken in full knowledge of your motives. The study of motivation can also lead to efficiencies, as you discover that you are not the only one with deadly intent.

The following four case studies feature Arthur, Beatrice, Claude, and Demelza. In each exercise, list the reasons why these individuals might be inspired to become Project Assassins. There should be between four and six for each case.



Answers are given at the end of the book.

Good luck in you career as Project Assassins !

others; with a little skill and practice, blame can be transferred completely to co-sponsors.

The epithet “elegant” is earned for the difficulties of reversing its effects. Demoting one of the Sponsors will usually arouse a “hornets’ nest” of politics. If an attempt is made to bring in someone more senior as Sponsor, it is likely to affront the existing Sponsors, recruiting them to the profession.



For its combination of apparently impeccable motivation, effectiveness, blame diversion, and permanence it is second to none.

Ensuring the wrong Sponsor

If a Sponsor is insisted on but multiple Sponsors cannot be arranged, other approaches are possible. Having the “wrong” Sponsor¹² is a useful temporary measure that, if a company is not alert, might also provide a permanent solution. Three variants are possible.

The Provider as Sponsor

Ensuring that the Sponsor is a provider rather than a customer will invariably receive good support from the provider. Their control is increased and their risks and costs can be reduced. For example, if you are setting up a training programme for staff then the Head of Training is ideal. You can guarantee that the project will be cost

¹² For the Project Assassin this is, of course, the “right” Sponsor

rather than benefit driven and that real needs will be overlooked.



Internal providers will naturally focus on completion and delivery; external providers will have the purer motivation of payment, even if they speak continually of “partnership”¹³.

It is a strange but extremely useful phenomenon that managers become confused when the language of sponsorship is used. Those who would not dream of asking the sharply dressed salesman who visits them twice a year to decide what their company should purchase are quite content to have their IT Director sponsoring a new network.

Senior managers have golden opportunities to institutionalise this practice. Multiple kills can then be effected by that single stroke.

The Junior Sponsor

Arranging for as junior a Sponsor as possible can be equally effective. An ideal candidate is someone whose operational responsibilities do not quite extend across all those who will be materially affected. They will not have the necessary authority to play the role effectively, but it will not be immediately evident. When the project needs to drive through changes to working practices, the

13 Some have even used “friendship” and I fear that “love” may soon follow as “co-location” has definitely been heard in discussions

Underpinning principles

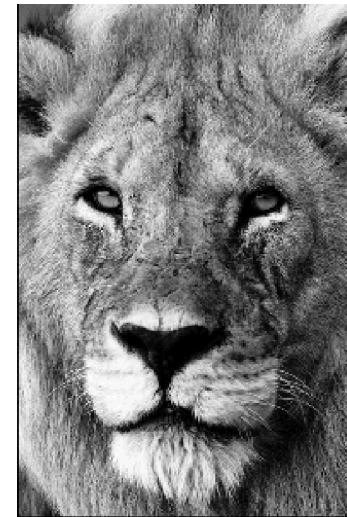
There are three underpinning principles, without which no examination will be passed.

- Disconnection - ensuring that nothing is logically connected with anything else on a project
- Miscommunication - keeping as many people in the dark about as much as possible for as long as possible.
- Vagueness - blurring understanding with vagueness and ambiguity.



Recurring theme

There is always more than one way to remove the fur from a feline. These techniques are paired: virtues can always be turned into vices and vice versa.

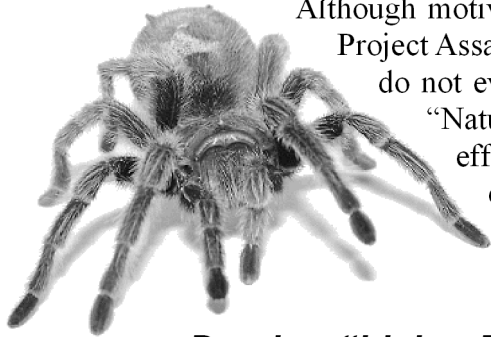


33 Projects are doomed when people do things without understanding why, so ensure that “no time is wasted explaining”

Summary

The astute trainee Project Assassin will have detected a number of key themes emerging in this Guide. They are summarised below for convenience.

More of us than you might think



Although motivation will vary, there are many Project Assassins. Indeed there are some who do not even realise what they are. These “Natural Born Killers” are no less effective. They should not be despised for their ignorance, as their assistance can prove invaluable.

Dead or “Living Dead”

It is essential to be quite clear about which sort of project death is sought. The Project Assassin must decide whether the project should stop or continue indefinitely. The selection of appropriate means of assassination depends on that choice; inappropriate selection can have some very unfortunate consequences.



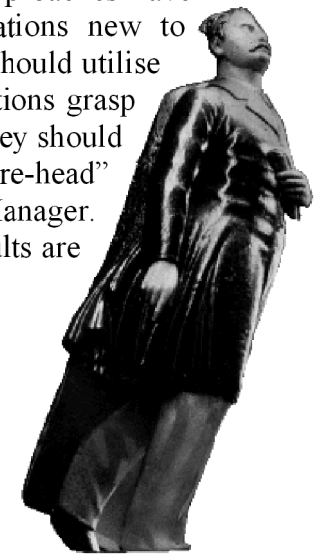
Junior¹⁴ Sponsor’s lack of authority will come into play and the desired outcome will be obtained.

The Senior Sponsor

Obtaining a Sponsor who is too senior will obviously not work for big projects, but it can be extremely effective where only a localised change is envisaged.

Going over the head of the “natural Sponsor” is an excellent way to gain their opposition to the project. It also ensures that the appointed Sponsor takes a more detached role as the project will never be high on his agenda. Minimising project problems, insisting that issues are too minor to bother him with and stressing other (more urgent and important) priorities will all help here. Encouraging the idea that the role of Sponsor is an expression of status is invaluable.

Both the Junior and Senior Sponsor approaches have been particularly effective in organisations new to project working. The Project Assassin should utilise the time available before such organisations grasp the true nature of the Sponsor’s role. They should be encouraged to think of it as a “figure-head” position or as a sort of senior Project Manager. If both can be achieved at once, the results are especially rewarding.



¹⁴ It should go without saying that “Junior” should never be vocalised and that as grandiose a title as possible will facilitate this approach

Changing Sponsor

Continually changing the Sponsor is a very effective fallback strategy, where other attempts have failed.



The vision for the project is unlikely to stay consistent. “Root and branch”¹⁵ reviews (that take no account of previous agreements) are likely to occur together with continual changes to requirement, blurring of project identity, renegeing on resource commitments, etc.

This is why attaching sponsorship to an organisation or role can be so effective. A changing Sponsor has then been woven into the fabric of a project. It becomes even more effective if the role is regularly and routinely reassigned e.g. a rotating chairman of a committee is ideal.

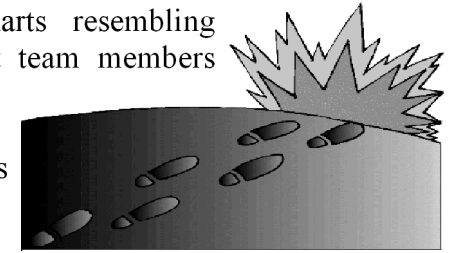
Plants can be prevented from establishing roots by regularly movement. The same principle works for sponsorship.

Ignoring the Sponsor

Ignoring the Sponsor is definitely a last resort as, with a good Sponsor is in place, it may reveal the Project Assassin’s hand.

15 Something about “the wood” and “the trees” comes to mind

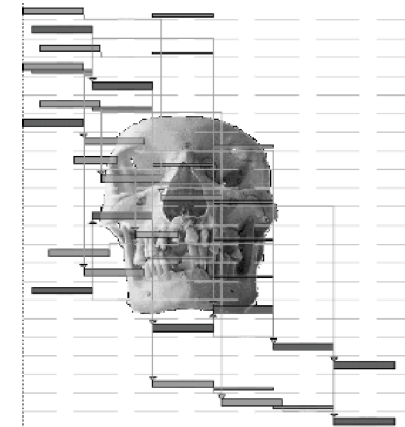
detailed plans produces Gantt charts resembling “Magic Eye” pictures³² and project team members going cross-eyed reading them.



A delightful minefield of surprises usually results.

Any suggestion of dividing the project into more manageable chunks should be avoided. Resort may need to be made to the programme concept, moving as much activity as possible from the project to the programme level to create a “programme” which is really just a big project. The danger of it becoming a real programme can be mitigated by avoiding and focus on project dependencies.

The “Golden Rule” is that any project (or programme) must be as impressive as possible. If nothing else, this is a good way to get media attention for the programme or project, especially when it fails.



32 Those who can “read” these pictures will begin to see a grinning skull, but this may be a reflection

Remembering that size matters

Finally, it would be wrong to despise the obvious by failing to appeal to the Project Manager's *ego*. It is rare to hear a Project Manager boast about how small his project is.

Ensuring that the scope of any project is as large as possible is therefore as easy as it is fruitful. The larger the project's scope, the more resources it will consume, the more interfaces it will have, the more critical will be its delivery, the greater will be its chances of failure. Despite, or perhaps because of this, suggesting to a Project Manager that his project must encompass more will be knocking on an open door.



It can readily be established that any two pieces of work are connected and must therefore be part of one project. Ways of accomplishing this include the development of metrics that will be influenced by more than one project, the sharing of resources, and the invention of requirements which both projects must play a part in meeting³¹.

The Project Assassin should encourage the idea that dependencies are bad without allowing the realisation that internal dependencies on a large project are almost as problematic. Subsequently insisting on the most

Extreme care must be taken but some success may be achieved by:

- persuading the Sponsor that *ad hoc* meetings will suffice, as his diary is already too full
- asking for these when he is unavailable
- postponing any which are inadvertently arranged under the pretext of project deadlines
- arranging for urgent 'phone calls to interrupt any unavoidable meeting

Ensuring that there is an intermediary between the Project Manager and Sponsor is a less dangerous approach that invariably produces desirable outcomes. Line managers may be eager to assist and Programme Managers, who are often unclear about their roles, are also very valuable in this context. Either will gladly become go-betweens, preventing the efficient transfer of information between Sponsor and Project Manager and *vice versa*.



31 Little effort is required as this is aided by natural vagueness about what a project is supposed to achieve

Hiding Value

Whilst intervention at the sponsorship level is probably the most deadly type of weapon in the Project Assassin's armoury, hiding value is undoubtedly the easiest to use.

Some have argued that this strategy should be reclassified as Assisted Suicide, but that purist approach undervalues the defensive skills that may be necessary at a moment's notice.



Like the Goalkeeper who has had nothing to do for 89 minutes of the match and is then called on for a last minute save, the Project Assassin must be ever vigilant for outbreaks of project management "best practice". He may be called on to parry them "over the bar", into shelf-ware, at a moment's notice.

Obscuring a business case

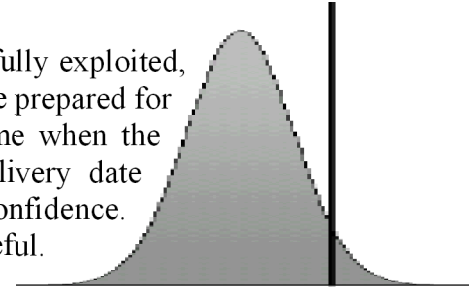
In many cases, all that is needed to obscure a business case is vigilance to prevent any unwanted thoughts of company profitability or undue quantification of benefits from creeping in unexpectedly.



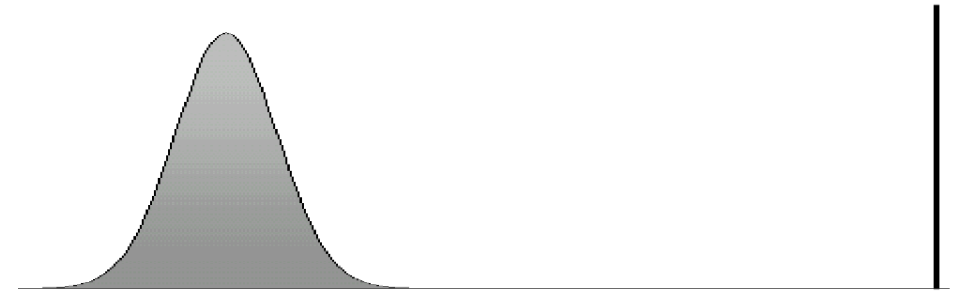
The seeds of project demise should be sown early. If the business case is unclear, then the likelihood of a project surviving in any useful

"95% sure" date

Whilst this innumeracy should be fully exploited, the Project Assassin must always be prepared for the unexpected. The day may come when the request is made for a project delivery date which can be quoted with 95% confidence. Another trick may then come in useful.



Once more, this is a subtle perversion of "best practice" which promotes the idea of three point estimation³⁰. If the worst case number for an activity is the "95% sure" estimate then, by an aberration of statistics, summing these for all activities gives a "95% sure" figure for the total project. The very large estimate produced will either be rejected, killing the project, or be accepted creating a project that will be as close to "living dead" as makes no difference. Project law dictates that effort will expand to fill the time available.



NB This will not work if anyone with statistical knowledge is involved!

³⁰ Three point estimation uses estimates for best, worst, and most likely case for each activity so that a range of costs and/or dates can be calculated

Estimating to fail

Estimation is another fertile area that can be cultivated in a number of different ways.

Care required

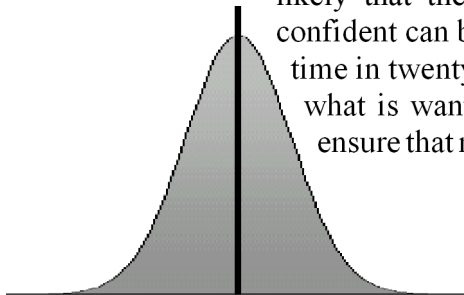
Senior managers are always wildly optimistic about what can be achieved; project team members are invariably pessimistic. It should go without saying that combining these viewpoints in any way is counterproductive to our ends.

Optimistic and pessimistic may average out to realistic!

A little mathematical knowledge is useful to the Project Assassin, especially when working with those having less. There is great power in numbers, which sometimes seem to take on an almost mystical quality rendering the otherwise perceptive person quite incapable.

“Most likely” date

The number of people who will accept a “most likely date” for a project to complete is surely amazing, given that this means a 50% likelihood of failure. It is far more likely that they want a date which they can be 95% confident can be met; a date that will only be missed one time in twenty. In quoting what is requested rather than what is wanted, Project Assassins must be careful to ensure that none of the subsequent blame falls on them.



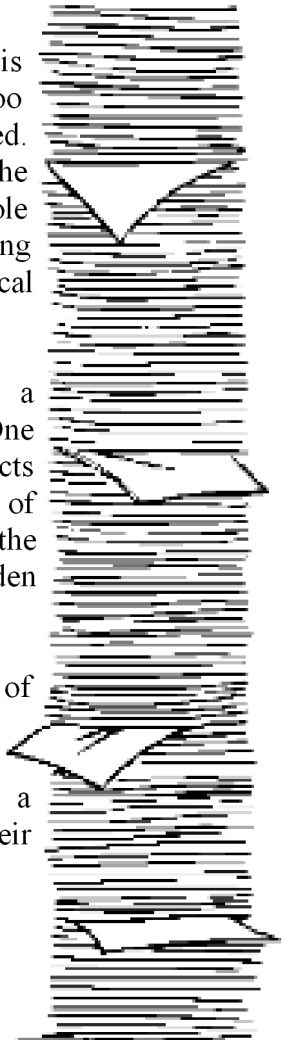
sense is greatly diminished. Two major approaches can be taken and within them a number of strands can be followed. The two main approaches are Profuse Documentation or Lack of Documentation.

Profuse documentation

Before thinking of which documentation is most effectively ignored, the advantages of too much documentation should be considered. The more material produced, the lower the chances of any piece of it being read. A whole host of opportunities are created for damaging inconsistency and concealment of critical information.

How many documents are generated by a typical project? Ten? One hundred? One thousand? Ten thousand? More? Some projects generate several tens of thousands of documents. Far from being a problem for the Project Assassin, this provides a golden opportunity with little danger of discovery.

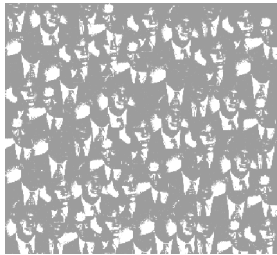
It is interesting to calculate the likely effects of a given number of documents on project health. Projects with as few as a hundred documents are as likely as not to contain a significant discrepancy within their



can be encouraged so that no document is approved until it has passed a review without further comments being raised. The cyclic nature of commenting, with a change in one direction being subsequently reversed, will do the rest. Something akin to perpetual motion results except that here the “machine” will be real as well as purposeless.

Ensuring “engagement”

Another tactic related to review is “engagement”, but this must be used with care. Involving many people may have unfortunate results for the health of a project unless too many people are involved. Ensuring that multiple sign-offs of even the most trivial document or change are required and that inaccessible people are part of the process is almost too obvious to mention, but should not be overlooked.



Emphasising form over content

In the quality arena, we are particularly blessed in the area of form over content. We often have “quality experts” as unwitting allies who can readily be persuaded that they own quality²⁹. Frequently we can rely on them to concentrate on the things that they understand, such as the spelling and punctuation in documents, rather than the things which really determine quality.



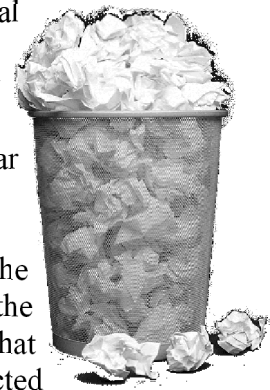
29 Distressingly this viewpoint is on the decline but such changes take time to work through a community and it may still be prevalent at higher level

documentation. Fatal weaknesses become virtually certain where there are many more documents.

If the project is for an external customer, profuse documentation is the method of choice for the Project Assassin. It is particularly successful in organizations that measure quality by the depth of documentation¹⁶.

Lack of documentation

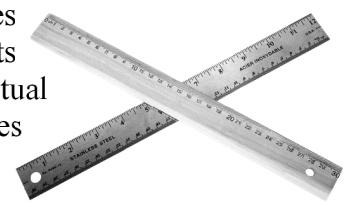
By contrast, lack of documentation is particularly favoured for in-house projects where no contractual arrangements exist and where the internal resource is considered to be free¹⁷ and unlimited. That very fact can distort any cost-benefit calculations admirably so that project scope can expand far beyond any in-house capability to deliver.



Far and away the best stratagem in following the “lack of documentation” approach is to avoid the definition of benefits altogether. It is remarkable that after years of use, it still remains largely undetected but, if benefits are insisted on, several equally deadly lines may be followed.

Quantification of benefits

Avoiding the quantification of benefits gives the pretence of having determined benefits without the inconvenience of actual understanding. Useful words and phrases

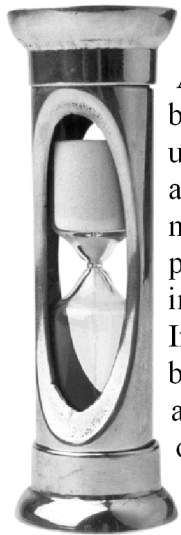


16 This is measured in inches, rather than level of detail
 17 A somewhat half-hearted version of this exists within some organisations where internal costs are calculated solely from salaries and ignore overheads but this is better than nothing

include “an improvement in”, “better”, “faster”, “more accurate” and the ever popular “increased customer satisfaction”¹⁸. Care must be taken with this last term as a belief that this can be quantified is rapidly spreading and would obviate its use.

Timing of benefits

If used properly, ensuring that the timing of benefits is left vague can enable a project to keep running even when benefits are manifestly not being accrued.



A rather clever use of this ploy is to describe benefits that are fixed, but to that which is itself uncertain. For example, “£1M of cost savings will accrue when 100,000 customers have used this method of payment” gives the impression of precision whilst not conveying any useful information about what benefits will actually result. If customer usage never rises to 100,000 then no benefits are promised! Even if this level of usage is achieved, three very different “rewards” are obtained by reaching it in a month, a year or a decade, leaving plenty of room for the Project Assassin to manoeuvre.

Ownership of benefits

A particularly valuable ploy is to make sure that no individual is tasked with the achievement of benefits. Specificity of benefits and their timing is only damaging

18 Useful words and phrases with a broader remit include “strategic”, “legally required”, “compliance”, “necessary”, “appropriate”, “timely” and of course “immeasurable”, “unquantifiable” or “qualitative”

19 It is much better to say “accrued yet”, as this leaves open the tantalising possibility of future gain without any level of commitment to achieving it.

Championing Quality

It should go without saying that the idea of quality as “fitness for purpose” is anathema to the Project Assassin. Such a concept seriously prejudices the exercise of our profession and diminishes our chances of survival. It is much more helpful when quality is thought of in more philosophical terms, devoid of any practical application.

Gold plating

Documents

Gold plating has been considered before in the context of profuse documentation of the Business Case or of the requirements. As the principle that the more documents you have, the higher the probability of significant discrepancies is based purely on statistics, this technique obviously works more generally.



Review

A useful alternative approach is to “Gold plate” the review process. By arguing that documents must be absolutely correct, the need for review can be over-emphasised. With a little effort, multiple reviews

A rose by any other name...

One nice variation on the quality theme is to encourage debate about whether to use English or American English in documents.

Hours of amusement can result.

your friends. As producers of the “living dead” they are perhaps unequalled, because there will follow numerous attempts to meet strategic objectives by “tweaking” what is inherently the wrong solution.

Advocating tradition

In some arenas, tradition can be a very powerful ally. Strangely, the newer area of IT is particularly susceptible here. Perhaps an awareness of its newness makes it feel vulnerable and encourages it to strive for traditions which older disciplines have already cast off as restrictive.

The power of prototyping, joint development, etc. is worrying for the Project Assassin working in this area, but panic is not necessary. Even when such techniques cannot be avoided we can, for example, insist that requirements be documented without any reference to the prototype. In some organisations regulations may be cited, correctly or incorrectly, to support such a stand.

Similarly, the need for a single systems development process is useful. A “lowest common denominator” approach can be encouraged to roll back the years to an old favourite with its enviable track record of failure.

if someone will be monitoring and managing their accrual. Benefits linked to budgets, where the budget holder is a named individual, or to performance of an individual or team should be avoided; linkage of benefits to bonuses is particularly dangerous as then focus on their achievement will be impossible to prevent.

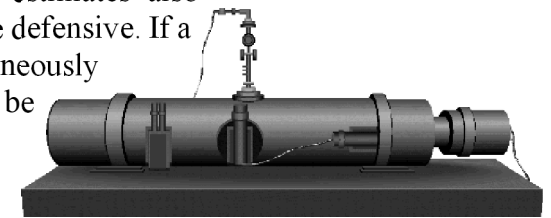


Manipulating costs

This consideration of how benefits can be usefully under-documented suggests that costs may be similarly susceptible but apart from the, ever valuable, ignoring of internal resources, the cost side of the business case is a more difficult target. Two ploys are worthy of consideration though.

Cost precision

Success has been achieved by tying down costs too tightly by demanding, for example, precise estimates before sufficient information is available. This is a favourite shot of Project Assassins working in Finance departments. If nothing else, it ensures that planning takes longer but in practice estimates also become less realistic and more defensive. If a budgetary squeeze is simultaneously applied then a project can be “throttled at birth”.



Cost invariance

Exclusion of risk from cost calculations also has considerable merit²⁰. Any suggestions that a range of costs is possible, depending on whether specific risks mature, should be countered by rumours of indecision and lack of control²¹. By subsequently ignoring the higher figure and continually quoting the lower the desired effect should soon be obtained.

Filing the business case



Even when forced to prepare a decent business case, all is not lost. Generations of Project Assassins have found the filing cabinet to be their best friend. The existence of a business case is annoying, but its use is what actually leads to project longevity. The business case that is filed and is never again referred to is the next best thing to having no business case at all. It is guaranteed that it will not be followed and that some vital detail will be overlooked. To see the surprise on the faces of those re-reading a long-filed business case at the point of handover is most gratifying.

Changing the business case

If all else fails, ensuring that the Business Case keeps changing can still produce good outcomes.

The Power of Ambiguity

In the UK, “Contingency Plan” means “plan of last resort, just prior to seeking alternative employment” but in the US it tends to mean “an acceptable alternative plan which we will probably move on to at some point”. When used in a project which spans the Atlantic, no-one will understand what the other side of the Atlantic is playing at. UK staff are trying to avoid like the plague the approach that US staff are simultaneously trying to move towards. Confusion results and each side believes that the other is trying to wreck the project. Resentment soon follows, with non-cooperation hard on its heels. Ultimately the project descends into trench warfare, with all the speed and agility which that implies.

Avoiding linkage

The avoidance of linkage has already been touched on in other contexts. It is a particularly powerful weapon when used with requirements. Requirements that are not linked to benefits and that do not have any bearing on the strategic direction that the company wishes to take are

²⁰ Ignoring risk in benefit calculations is akin to assassination by dental decay: very pervasive and effective in its damage, but you can't really claim any credit for something so endemic

²¹ “I just want the answer not the excuses” may be a little direct but holds the essence of this line of attack

fostered and is certain to be reinforced by the third parties themselves. Detailed documentation can then be described as “unfriendly” and “displaying a lack of trust”²⁸.

No time



The speed with which the project’s environment is changing can also be pressed into service. The futility of attempting to document such a dynamic situation is never carried to its logical conclusion: that proceeding with the project under these circumstances is similarly futile. Fortunately logic is rarely a problem.

Compromising

The idea of building compromise into requirements has a lot to commend it. It appears to be striving for agreement and involvement, both beloved by the proponents of “Business Change”, if I may be excused that obscenity, but it is sowing the seeds of later discontent and hopefully fatal weaknesses in the project.

The compromise is best embodied in the vague requirement, which each side can read as they wish. Agreement on words is then obtained without any chance of gaining agreement on their meaning.

To be effective, the requirements must be kept at a high level, specifics should be avoided and ambiguous terminology should be used wherever possible.

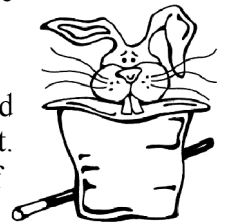
²⁸ Other useful terms, more generally applicable, include “waste of time”, “not cost-effective”, “slowing the project”, “superfluous”, etc.

The Project Assassin should ensure that “cut-off” dates for changes are not published²².

Encouraging as much input as possible on any change that might conceivably be made is standard practice but doing this too early in the life of the project is counter-productive as the project might actually be improved. As in so many of the arts, timing is everything. Coupling this approach with poor (or better still, non-existent) Change Control and Configuration Management processes produces delightfully toxic potions.

The ultimate aim of all these approaches will depend on whether it is desired to kill a project outright or to create a “living dead” project.

- To kill a project outright, its true value is revealed at the point where it is no longer worth its cost. The Business Case is produced like some sort of diseased rabbit from an undertaker’s hat.
- To create the “living dead”, the project “value” will be kept hidden for as long as possible. When it is discovered by others, they will also try to keep the project running until they can work out their own escape route. In general, the larger the project, the easier this will be: no-one likes to admit to really costly mistakes.



Either way, these are potent weapons.

²² Having them but not publishing them is, of course, acceptable

Sabotaging Business Change

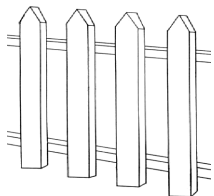
If Preventing Sponsorship is the most deadly weapon at the Project Assassin's disposal and Hiding Value is the easiest to use, Sabotaging Business Change is the subtlest and the least likely to be detected. It has a silencer and telescopic sights permanently fitted.

Communicating nothing

"Silence" is indeed a most appropriate word here, though an attack on communication channels need not necessarily be quiet. The less that is said²⁴ about a project the better, but that does not always equate with a lack of talking. What must be avoided is two-way communication.



- If the flow of information from those who will have to use a system can be stifled, it will not only result in inappropriate functionality but will also produce handy feelings of detachment or even resentment.
- Preventing information flow to this same group will ensure that process changes, training, etc. do not breath life back into a project and will build useful barriers between this group and the project team.



The last thing the Project Assassin wants is mutual understanding as this will inevitably demolish so many of the barriers which have been constructed so carefully.

23 Strictly, this should be "The less that is heard..." as what is "said" can be presented in such a way that it is not understood by those to whom it is "said", which shows the importance of avoiding any measurement of communications effectiveness

Obfuscating Requirements

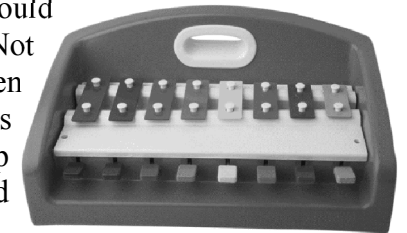
The choice of an obscure word in naming this strategy is not accidental. The use of language not in common parlance is an excellent adjunct to any of the following methods.

Neglecting documentation

Creating confusion in requirements is a well-known tactic with an excellent track record across all sectors. Avoiding documentation is its most often encountered form. Several tacks can be taken to ensure that requirements are not well documented.

Even a five year old

Insinuating that the requirements of a project are so simple that even a five year old²⁷ could understand them is very powerful. Not documenting the requirements then becomes a matter of intellectual pride as no-one wants to admit that they need help with something that a five year old understands so readily.



Partnership

In those unused to dealing with third parties on projects, the belief that "we are all friends" is readily



27 Fortunately, five year olds are in short supply in most work environments or such a claim could be easily checked.

used with some success, is to ensure that nobody knows who owns what risk.

Damages

Liquidated damages are another very useful concept that appears to allocate risk. By including them in a contract, people can be convinced that a risk has been mitigated even when the purchasing company has neither invoked this sort of condition in the past nor has any intention of doing so in this case, because that would delay completion even further.

Using a Risk Log (as in Tree)

A risk log is just as susceptible to becoming shelf-ware as a business case. Everyone involved can claim that they have done their bit in considering risks, without the consequent damage caused by the actual management of risk. Time spent persuading people that the “risk activity is done”²⁶ is always well spent.



26 Variants include “risk planning is complete”, “we’ve considered the risks”, and “we had a risk brainstorming session” as long as they are said in a way that implies that nothing further need be done

Use user groups

The setting up of extensive networks of user groups is a good way of prolonging discussions and exacerbating personal grievances, but only if they are focused on what the project can do for them personally. Once they start to consider what they, as individuals, can do for the project, they can become very dangerous.

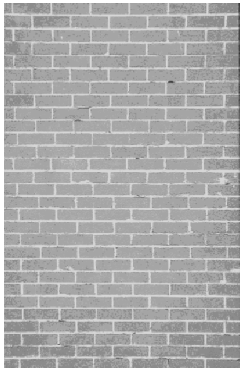
This is a tricky one to get right and trainee Project Assassins have been known to fail when such user groups developed into something which actually crystallized real business need.

Although rarely encountered, it is so damaging that this approach must be used with great care. Including known trouble-makers and excluding the input of anyone with broader business knowledge are both useful; those with actual responsibility for improvements linked to business strategy must be kept away at all costs.

Encouraging notional involvement

Notional involvement is a much favoured approach because whilst appearing to have the project's best interest at heart, its doom is being sealed. The principle of getting the least contribution from the most people should always underpin whatever means are employed for obtaining notional involvement.

Employing new variants on "over the wall"



Unfortunately the days of "over the wall" delivery of a product, a building²⁴, infrastructure or software are on the wane. Where this classical approach still works then the Project Assassin should exploit it, but increasingly this is spotted and things must be done differently. Fortunately, there are variants that remain effective.

- Getting the wrong people involved is relatively easy if help is sought from the managers of those with the real understanding. Those who will have to maintain whatever the project is delivering will spot any deficiencies; their managers may well miss these problems.
- Creating detailed plans for early involvement but then continually discussing, refining, and updating those drafts is a good way of turning "early" into "late".
- Creating lots of "useful" documentation for operational staff without asking them what form

24 Trying to grasp the concept of an "over the wall" delivery of a building may result in serious mental damage, so just think of lack of a proper handover process

Easy risk

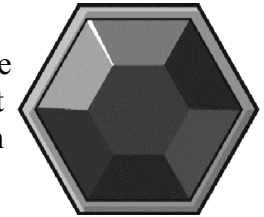
The useful counterpart to Vesuvius Syndrome is concentrating on risks that can easily be contained or better still, that have already been contained, and ignoring the bigger risks that pose a real threat to the project.

For example, if a thorough consultation process is taking place but there are rumours of an imminent policy decision

- The risk that the views of a group of stakeholders might be missed should be focused on
- The policy decision which might make fundamental changes to the project scope should be ignored

Allocating risks creatively

Creative risk allocation is a little gem whose value has only recently been appreciated, but it must be used quickly before there is too much discussion on this topic.



Risk ownership

Ensuring that the wrong people carry risks is particularly valuable with third party providers. For instance, it is very effective to make a vendor accountable for the risk that the purchaser might be affected by new legislation. One variant on this theme, which seems to have been

rely on people actually doing risk management, are relatively untried.

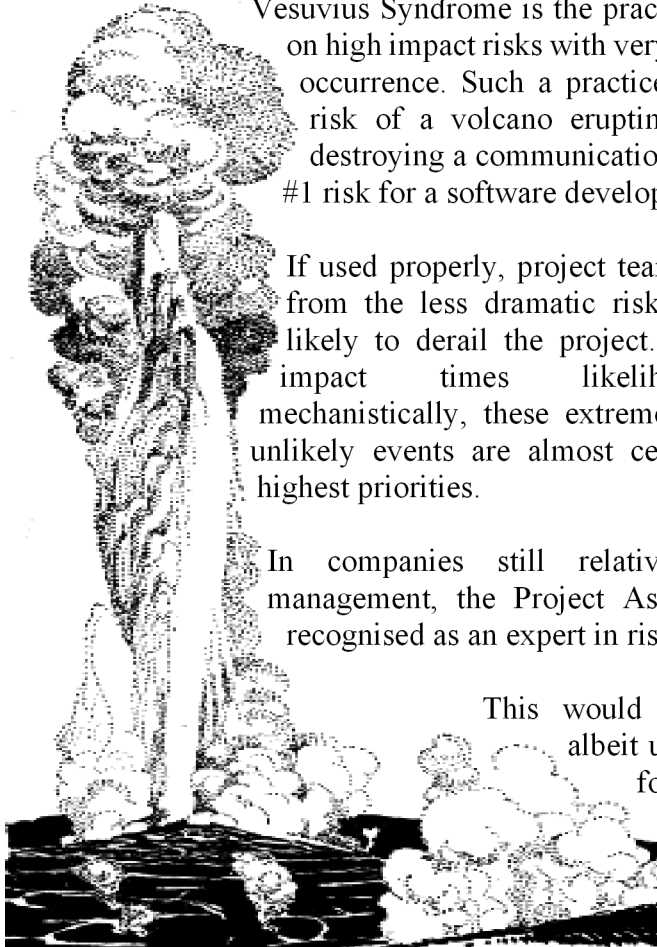
Vesuvius Syndrome

Vesuvius Syndrome is the practice of concentrating on high impact risks with very low probabilities of occurrence. Such a practice could result in the risk of a volcano erupting in Berkshire and destroying a communications hub becoming the #1 risk for a software development project.

If used properly, project teams can be distracted from the less dramatic risks that are far more likely to derail the project. By using a simple impact times likelihood calculation mechanistically, these extremely high impact but unlikely events are almost certain to receive the highest priorities.

In companies still relatively new to risk management, the Project Assassin may become recognised as an expert in risk.

This would be an appropriate, albeit unintentional, reward for services being rendered.



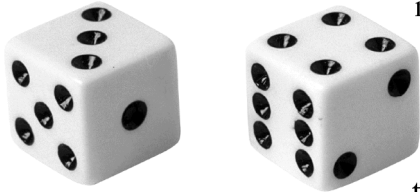
that should take or what such documentation should contain is useful if the operational staff are made aware of the problem²⁵ before the project is closed.

Projects may be killed very effectively, in either sense, by these means. The great advantage in these methods is that, as in judo, no great effort or strength is required. Subtle movements are made at strategic moments, catching projects off-balance so that they are brought down by their own weight.



²⁵ Little hints such as “I hear the nightly maintenance takes 16 hours” may need to be dropped

Avoiding Risk



Avoiding risk is not considering and eliminating or mitigating risk. That would be counter-productive in achieving aims of the Project Assassin. The focus of this strategy is on stopping risks being dealt with in a way that reduces the damage that they inflict on projects. It is almost homeopathic in helping nature to take its course.

Ignoring risk

Preventing anyone acknowledging that risks actually exist is a very powerful weapon. Most people don't like to think about risk and this natural aversion should be exploited.

Risk Management is for wimps

Those leading projects can often be convinced that acknowledging a risk is tantamount to admitting a weakness. This is particularly effective when dealing with "macho" Project Managers who catch bullets in their teeth as relaxation from their work and get their excitement from the unknown. They love to handle those last minute emergencies that they could have foreseen months ago if they had planned properly. They are famous for their heroic efforts and 22-hour days. Help them to achieve stardom and then keep clear as they turn supernova.



Risk Management is just SO negative

A related approach is implying that risk management shows a negative mind-set.

In certain cultures or organisations, failure is not an option (and therefore their people excel at it). The positives of any project must be stressed *ad nauseam* and negatives must be re-expressed as positives. For such people, risk obviously has unacceptably negative connotations and should not be dwelled on. When in their cars, the Project Assassin should be particularly careful about "opportunities to interface with fellow road users", more commonly known as "crashes".

"Inexpressible negatives"

The "inexpressible negative" results in positive statements such as:

- "The design of this building has the unique security feature of having no door at ground level"
- "Down-time on the production line has been included to encourage the development of inter-personal skills"
- "The speed of the system is not a significant problem as few people use it"

Reducing risk

The tried and tested techniques have been so successful in preventing the adoption of any sort of risk management, that the following newer techniques, which