

International deployments – not for the faint-hearted

Key considerations for delivering mission critical international programmes



Multi-geography programmes involve something CIOs don't often encounter in their day-to-day lives of legacy systems, ingrained business processes and multi-year vendor contracts. While it's an environment ripe with opportunity and possibility, it also introduces a new level of complexity and risk. What are the promises – and perils – that international programmes represent to CIOs?

Successful programmes don't just happen – rather, they must be meticulously planned and controlled in order to meet the objectives, on time, within budget and to scope.

As business change accelerates at an unprecedented pace, globalisation, coupled with a hyper-competitive business climate, has intensified the dependency between business success and information technology. Consequently, businesses are raising the bar... they're looking to their IT programme management capability to provide key competitive advantage, to unlock new revenue streams and expedite time to market for new products.

The greatest business benefits tend to be associated with the largest and most complex programmes, often spanning multiple geographies, cultures and time zones. This is because today, successful companies understand that globalisation can be a means to shore up

competitive advantage not only via lower labour costs but more importantly, through harnessing diverse intellectual capabilities, growth and quality enhancement opportunities, and the ability to get products to market more quickly.

Emerging markets are experiencing explosive economic growth and attracting attention from organisations around the globe. Multi-nationals are investing more in the Middle East, Asia, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa and South America. Not only do these geographies offer lower operating costs, but they are also home to rapidly growing middle classes that are potentially huge markets for the products and services of global manufacturers.

Whether CIOs today consider these markets as a new customer base, a competitive challenge or a labour pool, it's clear that they are becoming a force to be reckoned with. And CIOs are gaining more and more responsibility for those emerging markets since IT is one of the most globally integrated corporate functions.

Sadly, statistics indicate that the IT industry's track record in successfully delivering large and complex IT projects is less than stellar. It's estimated that international technology deployments impose two to three times the management load of national ones. Why? – because they have complexities and risk at every step, issues that those who deal exclusively in national programmes are unaware of and... ill-equipped to handle.

“Managing complex IT programmes, particularly those that span multiple countries, is a daunting task. Indeed, IT departments that attempt to implement global information systems must confront a host of vexing issues. These include cultural and language differences, time zones, legal issues associated with transborder data flow, tax requirements and other government regulations, telecommunications costs and reliability, problems associated with developing custom applications, staffing issues, and many others,”

explains Patrick Faure, director of Dimension Data's international programme office.

Technology risks are compounded by regional and local risk (i.e. physical, security, connectivity risks) not to mention unforeseen events: Consider the following scenarios: a truckload of equipment is hijacked in Italy... the next shipment is delayed by a truckers' strike. An installation is scheduled in Finland on Summer Solstice Day – not a single engineer shows up on site. A European-based engineer arrives in Ukraine without an import licence for his test equipment – and as a result cannot be authorised to enter the country.

Many organisations have departments typically only staffed to accomplish day-to-day business – not to implement large business process changes across multiple locations. Finding and sourcing correctly in specific geographies and managing these teams present further challenges. Outsourcing this function enables organisations to leverage their in-house skills to get technology products and services to market more quickly and at the lowest possible cost.

Good governance is critical to programme success. A poorly articulated management structure, overlapping roles and decision-making authority and positions filled by the wrong people (or not filled at all) can prevent a programme from achieving sustained momentum or bog it down.

“A robust programme management methodology is the key to ensuring the success of technology deployments – be they local or international. Common processes, templates, and a consistent set of expectations are critical to mitigating risk and dealing with all contingencies,”

says Faure.

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Language and cultural issues are amongst the trickiest challenges associated with multi-geography programmes. Be mindful of and prepared to deal with cultural differences, i.e. in terms of what constitutes appropriate behaviour and the way one conducts meetings and subsequently interprets the answers received. When it comes to managing international programme resources, be sure to leverage collaboration tools such as Webex, which enable each individual to “see” the same information in real-time. Presence and chat features make it easy to bring experts in to join calls and solve problems in real-time.

Globalisation is here. Its pace is quickening and will continue to have a growing impact on business organisation and practice. While there is no escaping the fact that global programmes are incredibly complex, the good news is that success is within your grasp – if it's done right.