IT Project Crisis and Escalation

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Crises caused by IT failures of one sort or another are in the news. The Queensland Health payroll implementation (Glass 2013) and the United States Office of Personnel Management’s Retirement Systems Modernization program (Fahrenthold 2014) are examples of failures in IT project management. Some failures are perceived as a crisis. For example, the rollout of the Healthcare.gov website was extremely public and was understood at the time as a threat to the universal health insurance agenda of the United States President (Brill 2015).

Three threads of research are relevant to IT projects in enough trouble to constitute a crisis. One is that of crisis frameworks which describe the development of a crisis in terms of recognizable (and predictable) phases (e.g., Pearson and Mitroff 1993). Second there is research into adapting or developing tools for assisting in crisis management, such as social media (see Vaast, et al 2017 for a case study investigating microblogging during the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill). Third, there is research into the role of de-escalation in resolving IT crises which resulted in a four-phase model (see Montealegre and Keal 2000 for a case study of the IT project behind the baggage handling system Denver International Airport during the 1990s).

Open for investigation are the actions taken to recover from an IT crisis. In particular, what are the procedures and techniques used to resolve a crisis? Do crises follow the paths laid out by the crisis frameworks and does the resolution of the crisis follow any of the existing escalation (or de-escalation) phase models? Answers to these questions may provide useful tools which can be incorporated into best practices for project managers.

For this work, we have chosen to conduct case research and to start with a single case. We have chosen to study the Healthcare.gov website rollout and rescue of 2013. The advantage of studying this event is that it is a well-known event involving a successful recovery after a disastrous start. There is an existing public record, documents are available through FOI (Freedom of Information) requests and the major players are still active.

References