IT PROJECT MANAGEMENT ISSUES AT

A LARGE CORPORATE BRAZILIAN BANK

Emerson Antonio Maccari

Professor of the Masters and Doctorate Program in Administration, *Nove de Julho* University, UNINOVE, Brazil

maccari@uninove.br

Cássio Rogério Santos

Specialist, International Executive MBA

Institute of Administration Foundation, FIA, Brazil

cassio_rcsantos@yahoo.com

Denis Alberto Batista

Specialist, International Executive MBA

Institute of Administration Foundation, FIA, Brazil

denisbatista1@hotmail.com

Fábio Hiromitsu Tocura

Specialist, International Executive MBA

Institute of Administration Foundation, FIA, Brazil

fabio.tocura@uol.com.br

José Gutierrez

Specialist, International Executive MBA

Institute of Administration Foundation, FIA, Brazil

jose-gutierrez@bol.com.br

ABSTRACT

The world financial segment is that which has most invested in products and services ground on Information Technology (IT). Brazilian banks follow this standard and have resorted to IT in an intense manner so as to foster competitiveness. Within this context, IT project management has become fundamental. In this study, the objective is to identify the impairments IT project management faces at a large Brazilian bank as of the perception of managers from both the IT and business-related areas. To this extent, a case study was undertaken and a semi-structured questionnaire was applied to 10 individuals that occupy leadership positions in the mentioned fields. Results indicate a lack of project management culture giving rise to: issues concerning IT project scope definition; communication setbacks between and within areas; absence of strategic alignment amongst involved areas; difficulty in perceiving an overall picture of projects; mismatch between project prioritization and delivery deadlines.

Key-words: Project Management. Information Technology. Banking.

GESTÃO DE PROJETOS DE TI

EM UM GRANDE BANCO BRASILEIRO

RESUMO

O setor financeiro mundial é o que mais tem investido em produtos e serviços apoiado fundamentalmente pela Tecnologia da Informação (TI). Os bancos brasileiros seguem este padrão e têm utilizado a TI de forma intensa, visando aumentar a competitividade. Neste contexto, a gestão de projetos de TI tornou-se fundamental. Neste estudo, objetiva-se identificar as dificuldades da gestão de projetos de TI em um grande banco brasileiro a partir da percepção dos gestores das áreas de TI e relativas ao negócio. Para tanto, realizou-se um estudo de caso e aplicou-se um questionário semi-estruturado a 10 indivíduos que ocupam cargo de chefia nas áreas mencionadas. Os resultados apontam para a falta de uma cultura de gestão de projetos, que ocasiona: problemas na definição do escopo do projeto de TI; falhas comunicação inter e intra áreas; ausência de alinhamento estratégico entre as áreas envolvidas; dificuldade de se ter uma visão global dos projetos; e descasamento entre priorização dos projetos e prazos de entrega.

Palavras-chave: Gestão de Projetos. Tecnologia da Informação. Bancos.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the early 90´s, the development of Information Technology (IT) landmarked the start of a new stage in the world of business and since then has brought about a true some revolution at corporations. This new phase, known as the Information Era, is characterized by the fast and continuous change in the scenario and manner companies undertake their commercial transactions: knowledge is deemed the newest corporate gift and financial capital begins to make way for intellectual capital (Baldwin, 1991), given that those who detain information likewise terminate detaining power (Quintella, 2008).

IT provides analytical and communication tools that are capable of changing the grounds of competitiveness, strategy and corporate operations. These tools are increasingly utilized to guide commerce; manage the corporation on a global basis; face changes in the economy, manage the "knowledge asset"; develop new products, services and provide support to the planning process (Laudon, 2003). Therefore, maintaining IT project management aligned with the company´s strategy is a must (Albertin, 2001).

Albertin´s guidance is perfectly applicable to the world banking segment which is the single market vertical to have most invested in products and services supported by information technology (Crane & Bodie, 1996). According to Adelar (2008), banks invest heavily in IT because the intelligent treating of information enables the development of customer profile aligned products. Here, it´s no different. Brazilian banks utilize IT in an ample and intense manner in support of their business strategies. Worthy of mention is the fact that the ability to treat a sizeable amount of data – most often in real time within a country of vast, continental dimensions – drove the Brazilian banking segment into becoming world class reference in information technology.

1.1 CONTEXT ISSUE DESCRIPTION

The most frequent IT related problems may be summarized into four categories: (1) alignment of the IT plan with corporate strategies and objectives; (2) IT architecture design bringing together the many corporate data bases; (3) IT project prioritizing; (4) IT project conclusion within budget and timeframe

forecasts (Turban, 1996).

This mishap is also observed within the financial segment, particularly that of banking which, in Brazil, invests approximately 11,9% of its revenue in automation whilst the services, industry and commerce segments invest approximately 5,7%, that is, less than half (Meirelles, 2008).

According to Febraban´s research (2008), banks invested R$ 6,2 billion in technology in 2007. Ti Inside (2007) informs that, during that same year, the sum total expenditure of Brazilian companies with IT was in and around some R$ 45 billion. The banking segment accounted for approximately 34% of this amount.

In this study, considering the issues posed by Turban (1996) and the high investments undertaken by banks in IT, the objective is to identify the difficulties regarding IT project management at a major Brazilian bank as of the perception of managers in charge of IT and those of business areas. To better address this general purpose, the following specific objectives were established, based on the elements of the *Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK): (a) identify the relevance of IT project management; (b) pinpoint the main causes of project scope change; (c) verify communication impairments between areas; and (d) identify issues in relation to deadlines.

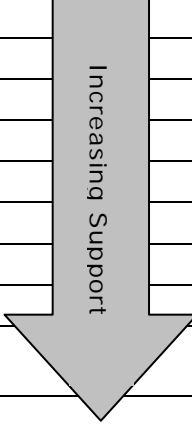## 2 ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF IT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

IT is represented by a set of hardware, software, equipment and other device components that collectively collect, store, process, recover and distribute data and information, supporting management and the corporate decision making process (Laudon & Laudon, 1998). Initially, IT was employed as a mere organizational support tool to automate tasks and eliminate human workloads. As time went by however, TI took on a fundamental role in business strategies, contributing with the reduction in operational costs and with the increase of corporate profits.

According to Turban (1996) efforts to establish IT system control planning date back to the early 50´s. Until then, IT resources were only directed to the development of new applications and revision of existing

operation system applications. Both were first systems control planning application targets. System development methodologies were adopted and project management systems implemented to provide for the planning of new applications. These included the well defined use of project phases, specifying deliverables, formal revisions and closed action items.

Kerzner (2002) prepared a comprehensive perspective concerning the evolution of project management, associating this to historically significant events, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Project Management Historical Evolution

YEARS	ACTIONS	
1960-1985	No allies	
1985	Total quality management	
1990	Simultaneous engineering	Increasing Support
1991-1992	Self-driven teams and empowerment	
1993	Re-engineering	
1994	Life cycle cost controls	
1995	Scope change control	
1996	Risk management	
1997-1998	Project management offices and Centres of Excellence (COEs)	
1999	Commuting teams	
200	Global teams	

Source: Kerzner (2002)

According to the author, in 1980, companies started to realize they´d have to take quality and costs into account so as to attain success. Thus came to light the value of total quality management (TQM) based on the principles of project management.

During the first half of the 1990`s, executives noticed that project management best functions when authority and decision making are decentralized; that a sound project cost control (horizontal accounting) enables improvements in estimates and understanding of the real cost of work required for product development; and that "reengineering" and *downsizing* mitigate "safety margins", "streamlining and focusing" the organization.

During the second half of the decade, verifications revealed that few projects were concluded within the structure of the original objectives, without changes in scope.   For this reason, more extensive and effective risk management methodologies were designed as opposed to merely protecting an estimate or a schedule. Kerzner (2002), notes that during this period, project management was recognized as a professional career, thus consolidating knowledge in this field.

The author emphasizes that, as of 2000, global project management became the major challenge, as can be seen from the vast number of fusions and acquisitions between multinational companies. According to Morrison and Brown (2004), project management tends to be extended to a large number of corporations given the rapid evolution of business and the need to more efficiently address demands arising from operational processes, changes in product technology, updates in information systems and redefinitions in the modes of interaction with suppliers and clients.

2.1 CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

For over 40 years, American companies have resorted to project management principles to attain targets and meet results. However, only in the last 10 years has it been acknowledged as key competency towards success.

There were three major reasons explaining resistance to project management at organizations: (1) project management was perceived as simple employee task planning; (2) executives found no reason to further their understanding of project management and its benefits given it was thought of as being task planning designed for employees; (3) executives feared that upon acknowledging project management as a key competency their empowerment might diminish given decentralization of authority, as decisions were to be delegated to project managers (Kerzner, 2005).

However, it´s worth mentioning that executive support is one of the main reasons that convey success to project management and renders the skill a core corporate competency. Kerzner (2002) listed critical success and failure factors in a project management system (Chart 1).

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS	CRITICAL FAILURE FACTORS
EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT ACCEPTANCE PHASE	
Consider employee recommendations	Refuses to accept ideas from colleagues
Recognize that change is required	Refuses to admit that change might be required
Understand the executive role in project management	Believes that the executive level is responsible for project management control
FUNCTIONAL AREA MANAGEMENT ACCEPTANCE PHASE	
Readiness to place corporate interests above personal interests	Reluctance in sharing information
Readiness to take on responsibilities	Refusal to take on responsibilities
Readiness to accept pier progress	Lack of pleasure in pier progress
GROWTH PHASE	
Recognize the need for a corporate methodology	Perceives the standard methodology as a threat, not a benefit
Support a monitoring and reporting standard	Unable to understand the benefits of project management
Recognize the importance of effective planning	Provides no more than moral "support" to planning
MATURITY PHASE	
Recognize that scheduling and costs are not meant to be apart	Believes that project status may be determined exclusively by scheduling
Track real costs	Not realize the need to track real costs
Develop training in project management	Believes growth and success in project management are synonyms

Chart 1: Critical factors in project management life cycles

Source: Kerzner (2002)

The author further mentions that critical factors to failure, that give rise to the formation of obstacles for efficient project management, are as useful information as those that lead to success.

2.1.1 Communication in Project Management

In this study, in addition to the mentioned factors, special attention is given to the communication requisite, which is an integral part of critical success factors in project management (PMBOK, 2004). Within this line of thought,

according to Carneiro (2005), communication is the main source of issues since when ill practiced or insufficient it might lead to the failure of any project. The author claims that communication is important during the entire phase of project execution, thus it ought to be planned out so as to determine what shall be communicated, to whom, when and how.

The PMBOK (2004) states that although all projects share the need to communicate information, distribution methods are subject to major variations. A prime factor towards project success is precisely the identification of stakeholder information requirements and the definition of the most appropriate manner to address such needs. The communication process of a project may call for deeper rooting, given that communication planning is often closely related to corporate environmental factors and organizational influences, because the project´s organizational structure might determine relevant impacts on the project´s own communication requirements.

Pursuant to this rationale, Fleury (1996) affirms that communication is one of the key elements in the ideation, transmission and consolidation of the symbolic universe of an organization. In agreement, Rabechini (2001) emphasizes that communication is vital to the success of any project, whether of personal or professional nature. Thus it is vital that a communication plan be designed at project start. This plan will mitigate given misunderstandings, friction and scope jeopardy between team members. Communication when planned and foremost placed may support and promote project development.

The PMBOK (2004) emphasizes that in almost all projects, communication planning is mostly undertaken at the initial phase. However, the results of this planning process are regularly verified and re-evaluated on an as needed basis so as to ensure the project may be adequately deployed.

2.2 IT PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Research published in *The Economist Intelligence Unit* (2007 apud Archibald & Prado, 2007), ordered by *Hewlett-Packard* and applied on over 1000 IT managers in June 2008 depicts an alarming scenario for professionals engaged in this segment. In 57% of cases studied, findings revealed not more than one in every two IT initiatives produced positive commercial results. In

addition to not bringing about satisfactory benefits to the business, a large portion of these projects are also not complying with pre-established delivery deadlines.

In this connection, at almost half of the companies surveyed, 25% or above of IT projects are delivered in arrears. This evidence poses as a good indicative that the role of the IT department still presents distortions in relation to corporate expectations. Likewise, at many companies, the area is not duly driven to meet demands. A survey conducted by TCS (2007) at large corporations in eight countries (United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, India, Japan, Singapore and Sweden) demonstrates that one in every three IT projects do not address contractor expectations.

At the banking segment it´s no different. However, the opportunity to promote management improvements so that IT projects may attain success presents the same proportion of high costs and investments in the field.

A successful project is one that terminates within schedule, budget and scope forecasts. A partially successful project is that which was delivered and closed yet relevant impairments took place (significant delays; budget overruns; deviance in scope, etc.). An unsuccessful project is that which was frozen, the product delivered is not in use for not having met user expectations or the delay was such that the business incurred in loss and the client reports profound dissatisfaction (Archibald & Prado, 2007).

In Figure 2, Archibald & Prado (2007) present an IT project performance evaluation – covering the period between 1994 and 2003 – depicting the scenario as it took place in the United States, Canada and Brazil.
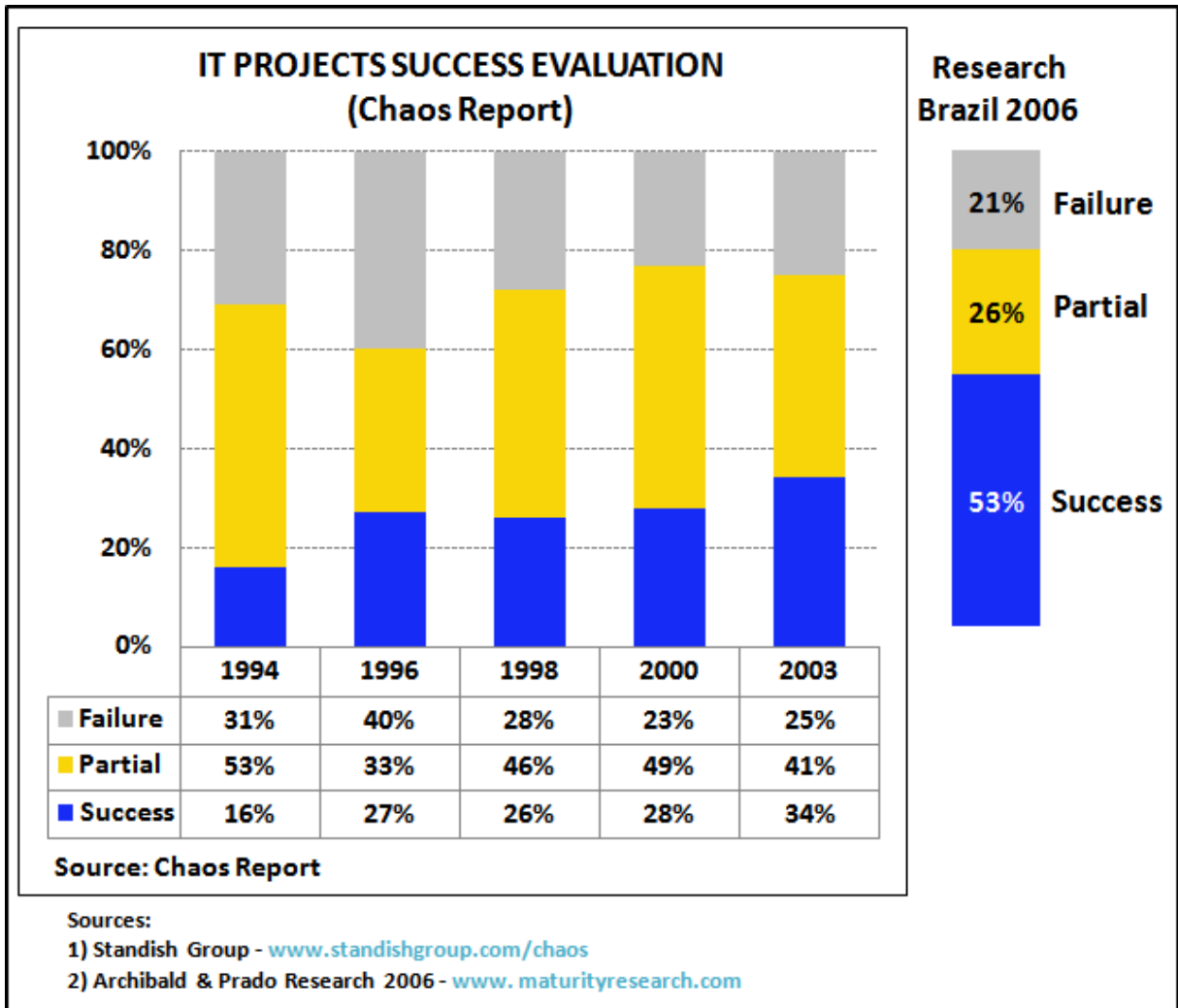
Figure 1: IT Project Evaluation in the US, Canada and Brazil
Source: Archibald and Prado (2007).

The evolution of success in IT projects in the US and Canada over the years is evident. As far as Brazil is concerned, one may also verify a higher percent success of projects. However, it is also apparent that there is much room for improvement given that 47% of projects only attained partial success or failed.

In this study, three major reasons for failure were identified: (1) frequent changes in scope (73%); (2) undoable timeframes (51%); and (3) incorrect or incomplete feasibility studies (27%).

It is inferred that management is fundamental to the success of IT projects, particularly in the banking segment that heavily invests in IT as it is viewed upon as being a decisive competitiveness factor.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study – seeking to identify IT project management issues at a large Brazilian bank based on the perception of IT and business area managers – comprised a qualitative survey, supported by the case study technique, with a semi-structured questionnaire being applied to seven IT and three business area executives.

The qualitative research attempts to conduct an in-depth investigation of a given public´s opinion in relation to a product, good or service. It is thus a study directed towards the analysis of concrete cases in its temporal and spacial peculiarities, as of the expressions and activities of people in their contexts. Results are not based on numerical data but in testimonials and information provided by subjects of study. (Flink, 2004).

Mason (1997) states that a qualitative approach ought to be: (a) systematic and strictly conducted; (b) strategically flexible, managed and situational in view of the researcher´s sensibility to changes in context; (c) reflexive, with views to obtaining data and the critical behaviour of the researcher, based on the idea of not remaining neutral in his role during the process; (d) combined with diverse methods, inclusively quantitative; (e) conducted ethically, considering the political context.

The choice came upon the case study technique because according to Yin (2003), Gilgun (1994) and Ghauri and Gronhaug (2002), it´s appropriate when one wishes to better comprehend a phenomenon that affects a certain individual, group or organization. This kind of approach is recommended when there is little control over events and focus is placed on contemporary real life phenomena. Within this line of thought, as per Gil (1991), the use of case studies is ground on the idea that the analysis of a unit of a given universe enables the comprehension of it´s whole or at least establishes the foundation for a subsequent, more systematic and precise investigation.

3.1 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The construct tool proposed by Maccari (2008) was the research tool employed, given that it establishes a relationship between specific work

objectives and research tools designed to address them. Chart 2 presents this survey´s construct.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	VARIABLES	ITEMS
Identify the relevance of IT project management	IT management	1
Identify the main causes of changes in scope	Project scope	2
Verify communication difficulties between areas	Communication between areas	3
Identify difficulties as related to timeframes	Timeframes	4

Chart 2: Research construct

Source: Adapted from Maccari (2008)

3.2 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

According to Creswell (2003), describing the limitations of the study enables it´s very circumscription and that of it´s specifications. The author further states that limitations may be related to the method utilized and the manner employed to collect and analyze data. Vergara (2003) affirms that every method presents limitations however it´s sound to pinpoint which are pertinent to the chosen method and the reasons why it is in line with the purpose of the investigation. This study is limited to the banking segment, to the researched bank in particular in view of the fact it´s peculiarities do not necessarily apply to other economic segments.

4   RESULT ANALYSIS

The qualitative research comprised the interviewing of 10 persons holding senior positions, whereby seven worked at the IT department and three were positioned at the bank´s business areas. The following IT project management related topics were addressed: (a) the relevance of project management; (b) scope; (c) communication; (d) delivery deadlines. Answers to each item were grouped and an analysis was performed in light of theory.

4.1 IT PROJECT MANAGEMENT RELEVANCE

Respondent opinions concerning the importance of IT Project management were investigated. Surveys revealed that it is regarded as of prime

relevance, so as to ensure that projects be executed within schedule, with quality and under the appropriate set of resources.

Following the same line of thought, effective management also ensures an improved standardization and documenting of processes involved in those of IT projects.

Respondents were unanimous in affirming that IT Project management becomes truly necessary given the large size of the banking context and the dimension of projects, since it´s not about bringing on competitive differentiators but rather of maintaining competitiveness. Another point of interest mentioned was the use of IT project management so as to provide an overview of the numerous sub-projects that comprise the "umbrella" Project. This systematic is required so as to ensure greater control over effective deliveries in the field of IT.

Those that were interviewed also mentioned that the importance of IT project management is known to Executive Directors; however, they are not sure whether this relevance is duly shared by the entire structure under their guidance. Thus, it becomes apparent that the major difficulties encountered relate to the poor strategic alignment of IT projects with the business areas.

It was further verified that the distance between the IT and business areas lead to the lack of strategic alignment. There are certain bottlenecks in the executive business culture that do not count on the appropriate involvement of IT managers at discussions and during the development of strategies. This gap promotes, at the IT area, an incomplete comprehension of the business areas true needs. Thus, these collaborators are unable to anticipate themselves with an aligned plan to meet deadlines and focus their best solutions on the execution of projects.

In general, respondents informed that the lack of strategic alignment generates the mismatch of projects budgeted by the business areas with those that are effectively undertaken by the IT area. Technical and business areas seem to have distinct interests and objectives. In this connection, respondents perceive gaps in IT project management when compared to the management vision proclaimed by the PMBOK and Kerzner (2002, 2005).

According to these authors viewpoint, it is of vital importance that the need for a management methodology/culture is acknowledged and largely

promoted throughout the company. Kerzner (2002, 2005) defend effective, synergic and integrated planning, between areas. It was precisely in terms of these points that respondents affirmed to be very far from the "academic" vision.

One must yet break cultural paradigms, believe in management, truly adopt an adequate methodology and above all, according to Kerzner (2002), recognize that change is required.

4.2 IT PROJECT SCOPE

In general it was observed that one of the most frequent factors is the difficulty in defining scope. This generates regular changes and arises from numerous causes. One such example is failure in communication: "an IT analyst thinks he understood the request", "the requester did not relay the information clearly", "there was no formalization of the request between the parties" etc. It is widely acknowledged that the understanding of definitions ought to be verified since there is a natural difficulty in writing something that one truly wants – a cultural process imperfection on the customer´s side.

On one hand, business area respondents believe that the lack of scope definition is not the main issue concerning IT project management. According to them, business areas know what they want but there is a need to improve communication with the IT area, whether in terms of alignment or even when it comes to a functional specification.

On the other, respondents of the IT area believe that business areas ought to be more agile and that business managers lack a founding understanding of systems since project definitions once relayed tend to be incomplete or obscure. That´s when the issue arises: does the business area truly know what they want? Is it truly a communication problem? Another factor that was observed was the non documentation of systems/processes since most of the information resides in people´s minds thus calling for cultural change whereby people are required to write more.

Respondents perceive that scope definition is one of the major problems in IT project management. The argument that is linked to this perception is in the fact that there are always many scope redefinitions or even that there is no

adequate culture/methodology enabling business area users to specify what they effectively need without losing the required agility to ensure project continuity.

One notices that the difficulty in defining scope derives from other problems. The most relevant, according to Carneiro (2005), is communication failure. This study identified that parties do not come to an agreement concerning what was requested by the business area and what was effectively understood by the IT area.

Another problem relates to strategic alignment, that is, business areas are not capable of transmitting the full scope of a given project to the technical area because they are not in sync (party individualism – individual targets). This occurs due to an issue related to focus since the business area only envisions the business requisite whilst the IT area only the operational perspective.

4.3 COMMUNICATION

It was verified that the absence of the project manager poses difficulties to communication between IT and business areas or even within the IT area itself. In extensive projects it was observed that often business areas lack the vision of which IT areas should be involved. Another point is that although there is formal communication, greater day-to-day interaction is required. Few "follow-up" meetings are held and in general, not all project participants are involved, as from start. At the researched bank, these problems trigger the following difficulties:

- ✓ The culture of individualized results per area directly influences communication since project structures usually require relationship between the various areas. The lack of dissemination and the absence of main project leaders definitions (focal points) likewise contributes to the list of difficulties. In general, the lack of a structured process in project management impairs the adequate definition of the project manager´s role.
- ✓ The request for project execution is placed through a system. Sometimes, only a single project start meeting is held. Thereafter, the soliciting area only makes a handful of confirmations with the systems

areas to confirm whether all is in place in relation to the planned date. That is why, in the majority of cases, systems developed through projects do not present sound adherence to what was requested/specified.

In this research, it became apparent that meetings must be held more frequently to ensure alignment and respective project monitoring, between business and IT areas. This might enable the clearing up of eventual failures concerning understandings, the establishing and revisiting of criteria defined for the execution of the respective projects. It was verified that, in many cases, there is no communication plan during the project. This coincides with statements made by Rabechini (2001) and Fleury (1996) and Carneiro (2005), to whom communication is vital to the success of any project.

4.4 PROJECT DELIVERY TIMEFRAMES

In relation to deadlines it was verified that, until recently, greater focus was placed on the individual performance of IT superintendents instead of the real need of the overall delivery of projects proposed by the business areas. In general, this individual performance perspective generates numerous conflicts in as much as project prioritization is concerned. In this sense, the shortage or ineffectiveness in managing the demand to adequately prioritize projects as well as the absence of corporate methodologies and architectures addressing the IT project management discipline are issues that directly impact the prioritization/scheduling of projects.

These problems are in large related to the lack of an integrated vision of the process and the lack of alignment between the ITand business areas. This absence of synergy impedes both from placing effort on the same objective and from complying with project conclusion deadlines. According to Kerzner (2005), the strategic alignment between areas may represent, in the long run, the difference between success and failure.

Furthermore, short, medium and long term objectives are unclear. Clarity in objectives is a corporate strategy issue and according to Albertin (2001), it is extremely relevant to maintain IT project management aligned with strategy. In this manner, project prioritizations will be in synchrony with strategy, i.e.,

business and IT areas will follow the same direction.

It´s worth mentioning, that the lack of prioritization may result in banks missing the opportunity to launch new products or not being qualified to meet some regulatory institution´s determinations, within the desired timeframe, and this might imply in massive fines for the bank, amongst other consequences.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

IT was initially employed as a mere organizational support tool to automate tasks and eliminate human work. However, as time went by, IT took on a fundamental role in business strategies, contributing with the reduction of operational costs and corporate revenue growths.

Project management practice is presented by Kerzner (2002); Morrison & Brown (2004) as one of the solutions towards keeping up with the rapid evolution in business and to address, with greater efficiently, demands arising from operational processes, changes in product technologies, information system updates and redefinition of the modes of interaction with suppliers and clients.

Although it´s important in all segments, IT management at the banking segment is even more relevant since banks are the prime investors and most dependant on IT to support their business strategies, considering that the intelligent treatment of information allows for the development of new products, in greater alignment with the customer´s profile. (Crane & Bodie, 1996; Adelar, 2008).

Considering this context, in this study, the purpose was to identify core difficulties in IT project management at a large Brazilian bank based on the perception of IT and business managers. Results indicate the need for more effective project management, mostly in as much as the following items are concerned: communication, timeframes/prioritization and project scopes.

It was further observed that the reported shortage of a project management culture is not treated as an issue of prime importance at the researched bank. Although existing project management methodologies are shared at all organizational levels, a cultural grounding that might leverage the process is not to be found. This is not a simple task. First the executive level

ought to believe in the direct correlation between financial results and an IT project management culture. Then, this certainty must be disseminated across all organizational levels. It is a cultural transformation that does not take place in the short term.

The absence of the IT area in the construction of strategies, alongside other business areas is yet another point that was identified. This also impairs IT areas from offering the best technological solutions or alternatives that may add value to the product or service offered to the client, in addition to generating communication, deadline compliance and project prioritization issues.

Strategic alignment is impaired by communication problems identified in this study and by "individualized visions" of projects. Quite often, each IT area conducts their phase in the process without knowing the project as a whole. This fragmentation impedes full understanding, doesn´t corroborate with corporate strategy, makes communication difficult and promotes prioritization divergence, impacting the greater project.

These problems become increasingly widespread at banks that have a large amount of customers in various segments (retail, small and medium-sized companies, private, governmental institutions, etc.). Nevertheless, the banking segment has presented expressive results given improvements in IT Project management and in the openness towards innovative solutions.

It is understood that the results of this study incites Brazilian banks that might thus seek even better results as of IT project management excellence.

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