

## **What I learned from a Failed Project**

**Fred Fanning, PMP**

### **Introduction**

Several years ago, the author was a portfolio executive for administrative programs. One of those programs was automated Travel Management Services. When he took the position, there was a task to implement an automated travel management system that was over a year behind schedule. The organization purchased the travel management system, and the company was trying to implement it against the wishes of the organization. The parent organization required all subordinate organizations to move to automated travel management. However, there were many in his organization that didn't want this to occur. The resistance was two-fold. Many liked the old travel management systems they were using and didn't want to change. Secondly, the financial staff did not want the travel management systems to connect to the financial management system because they were afraid this would lead to unauthorized access to financial information. The failure to implement this system had already cost two people their jobs.

### **Project Scope**

The fully automated system was to have all transactions done over the web using any personal computer with appropriate passwords and authentications for security. The travel management system was also to connect with the organization's financial management system so that travel reservation would be paid immediately and when an employee returned from travel they could file an electronically voucher and have the money deposited in their bank account.

### **Project Experience**

When the author took over the portfolio, he hired a program manager and travel manager to oversee the work of organization's project manager and the travel company's project manager. To offset some of the resistance to the program the team proposed a pilot to their senior official, and he approved. The pilot was run for several months and appeared to work well. The team briefed the senior staff members, and they agreed the team should move forward with the project. After that, the author found out that there was an issue. The program manager and travel manager ran the pilot without connecting the travel system and the financial management system. The author does not find this out for nearly a year. The entire pilot was a fake.

The author was shocked to find the program and travel managers had not executed the pilot just as the final project would require. The program and travel managers said the reason for their failure was that the financial manager would not let them connect to the financial management system. The author later found out this was not

the first time that this had happened. After several meetings with the financial manager, they agreed to a lengthy process of developing the interface that would allow the travel management system and the financial management system to communicate with each other. No other work on the project could proceed without this step.

To develop this, interface the team used the project management waterfall process. This plan included developing a requirements document for the interface. That document took nearly a year to develop. Of course, the team ran into more difficulty from the financial staff who had made changes to their financial management system while the team wrote the requirements document. Those changes made the requirements document incomplete. When the author left that job a year and a half later, the team was still not able to implement an interface between the two systems. Furthermore, nearly five years after there was no interface.

The author had to answer for the failed project, and it negatively affected his career. He was not the first person this had happened to, and he probably wouldn't be the last. Since that time, he has continued to manage programs and projects although never an automated system. He can honestly say that the travel management system project was the only one that he did not complete.

### **Alternative Project Methods**

The members of my team were trained in what the author would call the "classical method" of project management as outlined in the Project Management Institute's Body of Knowledge. The method had always led to successful projects. Even after this failure, the author went back to using the classical method. As you can imagine he second guessed himself on the travel management project for years after. At the same time, he continued to read about project management and kept his training up to renew the PMP certification. Along the way, he learned about Agile Project Management from the Project Management Institutes website. As he read and learned more about it, he realized that the SCRUM method would have been the right method to have used on the interface between the travel and financial management systems. The author says this because the SCRUM methodology could have allowed the team to perform several sprints that completed specific tasks from the product backlog. He thinks this would have enabled the team to encourage the financial management staff to take another step. Once the team took enough steps, the interface would have been complete.

The first step would have been to transition the project management plan for the interface into a product backlog. From this, the product owner would have been the person serving as the travel company's project manager could have broken the plan down into deliverable tasks or what SCRUM refers to as user stories. The first user stories would have likely been epics as they are described in SCRUM. With members of the travel management office, financial management office, and the travel company these could have been broken down into user stories that could be completed in short intervals of work or what SCRUM refers to as sprints. The smaller tasks would have allowed the organization's team and the travel company

employees to implement the task and verify that it was working before moving on to the next task and sprint.

## **Conclusion**

It would be naive of the author to say that SCRUM could have saved the project. That will never be known. Through years of analysis and learning, he believes that it would have done more to lead to a successful project than did the classical project management method. He came to this conclusion because the short sprints that are used in SCRUM would have given the financial management staff confidence that the travel management system would not have provided access to the financial management system. This would have been proven by testing and validation required for each sprint. If the author ever gets another automated systems project, he will surely use one of the Agile project management methods to ensure a successful project.

## About the Author



**Fred Fanning, PMP**

Washington, DC area, USA



**Fred Fanning** worked for over 32 years as a Program and Project Manager for the U.S. Government. He has peer reviewed books published by the American Society of Safety engineers. Fred has also written several other paperbacks and ebooks. His book *Project Management for Safety Professionals* was published by Kindle Direct Publishing in December 2016. He also has over fifty articles published in various journals and periodicals. His articles on project management have appeared in the PMWorld Journal; Organization, Technology and Management in Construction - an International Journal; and the PMI GovCOP Magazine.

He currently holds the Project Management Professional certification. Fred served as the Communications Lead for the Government Community of Practice of the Project Management Institute from May 2013 through December 2014. Fred has also spoken at national conferences on project management. Fred earned master's degrees from National-Louis University and Webster University.

You can contact him at [fredfanning@gmail.com](mailto:fredfanning@gmail.com) or visit his website at <https://fredfanningauthor.com/home/>