Managing project expectations in human services information systems implementations: The case of homeless management information systems

Oscar Gutierrez a,*, Donna Haig Friedman b

a Department of Management Science and Information Systems, College of Management, University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA 02125, United States
b Center for Social Policy, McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA 02125, United States

Received 27 August 2004; received in revised form 10 November 2004; accepted 25 February 2005

Abstract

Complex information management implementation projects develop cyclical downturn patterns that, if not managed effectively, can throw them off course. These cycles are intrinsically related to contradictions that are normally embedded in the project’s goals and expectations. The position presented in this article is that managing these cycles is more effective than attempting to eradicate them. Human services information systems are examples of systems that embed enormous contradictions. This paper uses the context provided by homeless management information systems to present a model of project management evolution. It explains how the cyclical pattern presented here can be used as a learning model that recognizes the limitations of deterministic project management thinking and the value of deferral planning, experimentation and balancing. The paper proposes a strategy to deal with this.

Keywords: Managing project expectations; Social sector; Project management; Project cycles

1. Introduction

Human Services Information Systems (HSIS) are a category of information management resources with the following characteristics: they address issues and populations that are normally associated with poverty or disadvantage; they involve large numbers of stakeholders for their development; there are considerable numbers of privacy laws that apply to their deployment and use; the economic equation for these systems is normally based on government or philanthropic sources of funding versus outcome assessment; the providers of human services rarely support information management initiatives; and they are normally run and operated by a social sector with very scarce resources. Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS), a subset of HSIS, expose all these characteristics in a form that accentuates the challenges. For example, most human services organizations address technical system operation through conventional training programs. However, emergency homeless shelters have tremendous staff turnover rates that make conventional training programs outmoded.

Homeless Management Information Systems are highly distributed client and case management applications that support the provision of housing and other
services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness; they address the data management needs of human services agencies that attend to this population and are often used for reporting purposes to government and other funding agencies. Comprehensive use of HMIS in the United States has been in place since the early 1990s by a handful of communities. Most notably are the states of Massachusetts and Wisconsin, and the Cities of Spokane, Washington, St. Louis, Missouri and Columbus, Ohio. In 2000, the US Congress passed a directive [1] to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requiring the submission of an Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR). This report, the first version of which is due in 2005, is expected to provide an objective assessment on the number of homeless individuals and families and the status of homelessness in America. The HUD mandate has given considerable impetus for communities normally referred to as Continua of Care (CoC) around the United States to plan and begin implementation of HMIS. The country’s CoCs have approached HMIS implementation in a variety of ways. While some have conducted their own implementation plans, the majority of CoCs have joined a regional or state-wide initiative. With equal impetus there have been developments in HMIS applications by communities and by commercial software applications development organizations. The HUD directive has had an impact on the speed with which communities are moving forward on HMIS implementation. As of 2002, 74% of CoCs reported to HUD that they were in a planning phase and had no HMIS in place; by 2003, nearly two-thirds (61%) reported that they had moved into a full-scale HMIS implementation phase.

This paper is organized in three parts. The first part describes specific and typical challenges found in HMIS project management. The second part explains the cyclical patterns of HMIS projects. This research indicates that these types of projects undergo a predictable series of ups and downs on their paths to full implementation. This section explores this project management cycle and provides explanations to some of the causes for the ups and downs, utilizing two illustrative case studies of HMIS implementations in the United States. The first is a state-wide implementation in Massachusetts and the second is the implementation in the city of Seattle and King County. The third part of the paper describes tactics that successful project managers have employed in dealing with contradictory project goals. These tactics are combined here into a proposed strategy for dealing with project contradictions.

2. Challenges facing HMIS project management

HMIS projects are challenging for four main reasons. First, they pose technical requirements on communities of stakeholders that seldom match available expertise. Homeless assistance organizations are concerned with addressing the most basic survival needs of their clients. Case managers are often drawn from the ranks of service recipients, and using computers as part of the service process is very counter-intuitive for them. Some organizations have fully staffed MIS departments who oversee all aspects of their organization’s information systems technical infrastructure. Other organizations are smaller service programs within each CoC whose technical infrastructure is limited to the use of phones and fax machines. In these programs, all client records are in paper form. Indeed, in some remote locations, Internet connections cannot be made in contiguous geographic areas. A daunting challenge for each CoC is to figure out how to deal with these wide variations so that all programs, at each level of technological sophistication and capacity, will contribute data to the centralized HMIS database.

Second, diverse interests and groups, sometimes in conflict, must cooperate to bring the HMIS to full implementation. Characteristically, advocates and government officials struggle over the size of the homeless problem and the locus of responsibility for solving it. Advocates must make the case that the problem is big enough to warrant government attention and resources, while government officials often minimize the problem and point to the private sector, to local communities or to the next lowest level of government for solutions and resources [2]. The kind of project management organization that a typical HMIS implementation represents fits in with what Gillard [3] describes as a tri-dimensional organization. This framework, applied to HMIS projects, suggests the importance of three organizational dynamics: (a) the project office: the HMIS central project organization; (b) intra-organization: the user community within multiple and distinct agencies; and (c) inter-organization: government and funding agencies, advocacy groups, HMIS oversight boards or committees and the community at large. Similarly, following Evaristo and van Fenema’s [4] typology of project management, most HMIS projects could be classified as “multiple distributed projects”.

Third, HMIS projects deal with issues concerning highly sensitive data that require securing and protecting the privacy of individuals whose data are held in the database. Agencies using the most advanced HMIS tools select among several approaches to handling client identity. The three most common client identification approaches employed by advanced HMIS networks today illustrate variations in philosophy and technology: a derived client code; a system-generated client key; or a photographic, finger printing or scannable bar code ID [5]. These approaches are chosen as vehicles for facilitating coordination of services, while protecting clients from unauthorized, harmful exposure. Clients and staff
are eager to assure accurate identification to speed referrals but are often particularly concerned about adverse consequences from disclosure of a client’s identity for: victims of domestic violence, persons with HIV/AIDS, mental illness, chemical addiction problems or other disabilities.

Lastly, HMIS projects deal with enormous resource constraints. The recent economic downturn in the US has resulted in enormous federal and state-level deficits. These deficits are projected to impact the social and human service sectors for several years to come [6]. In the best and worst of economic times, homeless service organizations operate with limited resources and are frequently faced with an inability to meet increasing demands for shelter [7]. This budgetary context impacts the willingness of organizational managers to invest in technology infrastructure, even though such an investment has the potential to enhance the organization’s ability to make a strong case with external funding sources regarding how public dollars have been utilized.

3. Effective project management

In the context of social sector applications, effective project management practice deals with change, uncertainty and contradiction, the hard realities of the HMIS project environment. Many scholars have contributed to our understanding of complexity, contradiction and uncertainty in project management [8–12]. In HMIS, reasons for this additional burden rest with the field’s relative immaturity and, in more than one respect, with its signature of innovation, which results in a turbulent implementation environment. Uncertainty in goals and methods [8,9], opposing forces at play [10], project conflict [11], and many varied interrelated components [12] are typical characteristics of this type of project.

The pressures placed today upon HMIS implementation efforts represent a natural source of contradiction; HMIS project objectives are all equally genuine and valid, and yet represent incompatible perspectives. On the one hand, HMIS implementation is a slow process that involves generating broad-based buy-in and enthusiasm in the face of predictable opposition at the ground levels where the HMIS will operate. A socio-technical evolution comes from the value that the day-to-day users perceive the system provides to them and the people they serve. On the other hand, community planners face imminent time, reporting and accountability issues that require immediate attention and conformance. This results in “a project management dilemma”, whereby leaders and managers must find creative ways of balancing seemingly opposite valid goals and methods for attaining them. The most effective project managers observed during the course of this research of human services systems are those who embrace flexibility and reject inertia; and recognize the value of “productive failure”, that is, the ability to recognize when operations or plans are not working well and to realign activities by capitalizing on successes from past experience.

4. Understanding the cycles of complex HMIS projects

4.1. Project complexity

HMIS project complexity can be demonstrated by displaying their many varied and interrelated parts [8,12]. Table 1 presents a list of typical major components of this type of project, characterizing each of the two extremes on a continuum between simple and complex projects. If the HMIS initiative presents characteristics of a simple project, the application of formal project management practices may be effective. Project managers would have less to worry about in terms of the uncertainty, change and difficulties as compared to large, complex projects. Small, simpler city or county HMIS initiatives, such as the ones in Rockland IL, and Lake County, IL, are examples of typical cities or counties implementing HMIS with the participation of about 9–25 independent agencies.

A large collaborative of regionally contiguous CoCs that have managed to cooperate on the initiative have numerous interrelated components. Examples of these more complex HMIS implementations are the State of New Jersey with 17 CoCs and a total of 220 participating independent agencies; the state of Wisconsin with more than 250 participating agencies; and the state of Georgia with more than 200 participating agencies. In these communities, the HMIS effort includes large numbers of diverse participating agencies, covering the array of available programs and attempting to undertake significant usage from the system. With a large geographical area and planning configuration, defining a decision and working group structure representative of the various regional constituencies is of utmost importance. These examples illustrate the added burden for project management to be aware and ready to respond to the project’s major social and political group dynamics that inevitably influence the project’s progression.

4.2. Project management cycles

An HMIS project is much more than a computer project because it operates within a strong social context, involving numerous stakeholders who actively influence its implementation. This social context is typically characterized by a number of key values: an overwhelming commitment to serve homeless people, a commitment to protect the integrity and privacy of these clients, and a commitment to improve the conditions within which current services are provided. The HMIS
proposition represents both a burden and an opportunity in light of these values. On balance, the positives outweigh the negatives. However, if the implementation is considerably problematic, negatives begin to outweigh positives for agency heads and end-users providing day-to-day services.

When an HMIS project is first proposed and designed, it generates high expectations. Discussions about the future system in terms of service integration, access to relevant client data at any participating location with all privacy safeguards being in place, and so on, are commonplace. Because the initiative will absorb considerable economic and other resources, community investment represents a significant sacrifice for the homeless assistance programs and organizations. Therefore, in the planning phase, expectations on promised returns must be high enough to convince the stakeholders to make the sacrifice. When the project’s implementation begins and the reality of the challenges that will need to be overcome sets in, enthusiasm typically begins to wane.

Table 1
Typical major components in HMIS projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HMIS project components</th>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers of participating agencies</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of participating agencies</td>
<td>Same type of agency</td>
<td>Agencies of multiple size, funding sources and affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs supported by HMIS</td>
<td>Some housing programs only</td>
<td>Entire array of housing programs, some services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service processes supported by HMIS</td>
<td>Intake and exit</td>
<td>Intake and exit, case management, information and referral, outreach, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups participating in defining policies and procedures</td>
<td>Small committee comprised of agency representatives</td>
<td>Steering Committee comprised of agency representatives, consumers, local government representatives, advocacy groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist groups involved in the project</td>
<td>Technical tasks handled by lead agency</td>
<td>Several groups/individuals involved in different aspects of the technical system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of separate deliverables and milestones</td>
<td>Simple list of deliverables</td>
<td>Complex project breakdown structure(s) involving various levels of activities, tasks and sub-tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making organization</td>
<td>Mostly by the lead organization</td>
<td>Several layers of authority such as working groups and committees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1 illustrates the project cycle observed to greater or lesser degree in most HMIS project implementations. This pattern begins when a high benchmark is set; in other words, a very high level of expectations is set which generate anticipation and promise. Soon after the realization that expectations will not be met quickly, interest in the project declines, in some cases to the point that the project is terminated. In most situations, however, project participants rebound and develop realignment strategies by changing certain elements of the project that are considered to be the cause of the current less desirable state. This balancing process of realignment and redesign continues until there is a product or process that meets declining expectations but that nevertheless, satisfies the core of the original requirements.

The authors have observed that the successful project manager understands this pattern and instead of attempting to prevent it, will apply focused energy to manage it. Fig. 1 shows this evolutionary path which, at the endpoint, resolves the gap between original expec-
tations and what the Continuum of Care ends up getting: a real solution consistent with the capacity and commitment of the participating members.

Lowering expectations is not the same as lowering standards. Rather it means that the participating members have, through experience and intense dialogue and discourse, come to better understand the implications of their demands. They have come to better understand realistic objectives within the enormous requirements and constraints surrounding HMIS initiatives. This collective learning is the process of developing tacit knowledge [13] and building a shared understanding out of conflicting and confusing information [14].

5. Two case examples

The following two cases are used to illustrate the project management cycle described above.

5.1. Seattle/King County, WA

5.1.1. Key characterization

The HMIS implementation in Seattle/King County is a complex one which, at full implementation, will involve over 240 homeless assistance programs. Future negotiations will require cooperation and collaboration with the state and city of Spokane and other CoCs in the state who have their own HMIS implementations underway. The range of homeless assistance programs within the HMIS network is far reaching and includes street outreach, emergency shelter, transitional housing, supportive services and permanent supported housing programs. The HMIS design is intended to facilitate client intake and exit processes, along with information and referral functions and other operational case management features. The technical tasks related to smooth operation of the system are dispersed among several entities, including the central server hosting agency, the software development organization, central server staff and government sponsors.

5.1.2. Benchmark

This initiative began with a strong commitment from the City Council, involvement of high-tech venture capitalists (through the United Way), and a cross-county human service and governmental collaborative advisory committee. This collaborative hired consultants to assist the community in a number of key tasks: the visioning and design process; creating advisory vehicles as an avenue for engaging supporters, skeptics and opponents in the development of recommendations for informing system design decisions; and identifying resources for the initial start-up, including the project manager position.

A broad-based visioning process was undertaken in the initial stage as an attempt to create a clear vision and shared ownership of the project’s design. The vision drawing shown in Fig. 2 depicts involved stakeholders’ high hopes for its HMIS implementation.\(^1\) Fundamentally, the community hoped to use technology to generate powerful data for public policy planning and to enable homeless and at-risk persons to secure public resources they needed in an integrated, barrier-free, and self-directed manner.

5.1.3. Disillusion

A major disillusion cycle took place in the project design phase. An underlying tension, affecting initial decision making processes and the slow pace of implementation, was the mismatch in expectations among stakeholder groups. The venture capitalists were impatient with the process and were ready to have a group of technical experts take over. An opposition group was doing all it could to stop the project in its tracks. The City Council and City government staff, who were champions of the project, were doing all they could to quell the opposition and to enlist the formal and informal leaders from the homeless assistance non-profits, the county and the United Way in contributing time, talent and resources to the project’s design decisions. Each group, however, was invariably supporting a set of values that in their views represented the best course of action. Taken together, stakeholders as a whole represented a disparity of views. This was the turbulent environment in which the design process took place. These circumstances inevitably led to slow results which, in turn, contributed to the distancing of participating stakeholders.

5.1.4. Rebound

Seattle and city council staff stepped back from the lead operational role and turned over control to a newly created central HMIS organization, led by city staff. The integrating focus of this group was to document the information requirements of the participating agencies. Project management, however, took a rather technical, software development approach to communicating with homeless shelters, completing the requirements task but, in the process, alienating user organizations. As a result, project management was replaced.

5.1.5. Realignment

The project got back on track when new project management leadership was brought on board. Under the new leadership, “accountability by all involved” was a primary focus. The newly hired leader, recognizing that

\(^1\) Vision drawings that powerfully depict a community’s hopes have been utilized by both the Seattle and Massachusetts HMIS project managers to refocus and motivate involved stakeholders, particularly during the more challenging phases of implementation that are discussed in this paper.
complex project management practices were in actuality alien to the participating agencies, adopted a simple open, activity and task-based operational model. In this approach, all stakeholders contributed to the formulation of the project’s tasks. During this phase, the HMIS software selection process was successful and the chosen tool was piloted.

5.1.6. Use

The project was successfully realigned when community stakeholders selected their system solution. The chosen option was a local system developed for rural communities in the state of Washington. After considering and assessing large and small commercial products, the community chose one that met its minimum requirements, rather than a solution reflective of its initial ‘grand vision’; the community reconciled the gap between its initially high expectations and more realistic ones derived from experience over time.

5.2. State of Massachusetts

5.2.1. Key characterization

The HMIS implementation in Massachusetts, like Seattle/King County, is also a complex one which, at full implementation, will involve over 300 homeless assistance programs across 21 CoCs. The parent organizations administering these programs vary from small ones serving as few as eight families in an emergency shelter to those serving more than 1000 homeless individuals in twenty plus different programs daily. A diverse set of stakeholders have had varying degrees of input on the specification of project deliverables, program implementation processes, and policy decisions. The technical tasks related to smooth operation of the system have been dispersed among several entities, including the central server hosting agency, the software vendor and central server staff. Finally, the central server staff has been responsible for effectively meeting a complex set of project as well as operational deliverables.

5.2.2. Benchmark

In 1995–1996, the broad-based stakeholder group involved in ‘visioning’ Massachusetts’ HMIS, like Seattle/King County stakeholders, hoped to use technology to impact public policy planning, to improve daily operations and service planning and to enable homeless and at-risk persons to secure public resources they needed in an integrated, respectful and self-directed manner. See Fig. 3 for Massachusetts’ Vision Drawing.

Massachusetts, like a handful of other early innovating communities adopted the only HMIS solution available at the time.

5.2.3. Disillusion

Subsequent to an initial phase, in which a handful of enthusiastic programs field tested the available HMIS software, problems with its functionality and vendor responsiveness surfaced and needed to be addressed. Agency heads and central server staff assessed the limits of existing technical capacities of homeless assistance organizations across the state and what it would take to operationalize the ‘grand vision’. Soon it was understood that with the current solution, it would take years before such vision could be realized. Absent a mandate by funding sources for participation, and with the objective of raising a declining interest by participating agencies, one-time stipends of $1000 were provided for a time as an incentive to enable programs to purchase computers, modems and/or data entry staff time. Central server staff also built new functions around the software tool, a
strategy that provided a measure of control over the user-friendliness of the technology. The implementation proceeded but at a much slower pace than had originally been planned.

5.2.4. Rebound

In 1999, to deal with sustained problems with the functionality of the software and lack of responsiveness of the software vendor, project management convened teleconference planning sessions with federal partners and the other US communities using the same software product. This bridge building strategy resulted in a showdown with the software vendor and, ultimately, a concerted effort to engage systematically in choosing a new software product through the creation of a national organization, the National Human Services Data Consortium (NHSDC), and its issuance of a competitive request for proposals (RFP). Project management in Massachusetts involved local end-users in the review and choice of new software. Once the new software product was chosen, the expectations of stakeholders once again began to rise.

During this period, project management diffusion became the modus operandi of the central server organization, a consequence of both limited funding and the need for unique skill sets, not easily found in one or two persons. Dispersed management was not an effective long-term strategy for meeting project and operational deliverable timetables satisfactorily.

5.2.5. Realignment

Following the unsuccessful year-long experiment, a new solution was adopted. The new HMIS was a web-enabled application. Web-hosting responsibilities were inordinately draining limited central staff resources that would be put to better use in providing enhanced technical assistance to participating agencies and generating analytical reports. As a result of this realization, project management then contracted with the software vendor for hosting of the HMIS web and database servers. From 1999 to 2002, the client data coverage standard was reached and, with one exception, annual homelessness assessment data releases were issued.

5.2.6. Use

The shift in focus toward enhanced technical assistance and shelter workforce development has resulted in the creation of online technical assistance tools, a help desk, a data quality program, as well as more advanced trainings for case managers and agency system administrators. In addition, data integration functions are in use to enable agencies using their own homegrown MIS or another vendor-developed software tool to periodically contribute their de-identified client data into the central database. Powerful data dissemination tools accessible to any web-user, are also now in use.

As of January 2005, a major project management transition is underway. With the development of new technologies by state government, project management, Steering Committee members, and representatives from the project’s primary funding sources are working together to transition central server responsibilities to the state and its CoCs in an effort to take the next steps in realizing the ‘grand collective vision’ articulated nearly a decade ago.

A number of lessons and observations can be drawn from these two case examples. First, complex projects that involve heterogeneous stakeholder groups almost invariably pursue logically inconsistent objectives simultaneously. This is supported by Quinn and Rohrbaugh [15] who recognize the value of contradiction in their competing values model and Denison et al. [16] who show that these are traits of effective, committed leadership. Second, when the project management cycle is dealt with properly, the resulting realignment will propel the project towards a satisfying solution. Third, rebound and realignment activities require a balancing act between monitoring and adjustment actions while keeping
the communication open between the people leading a change effort and those who will be affected or are responsible for implementing the change [17].

6. Managing expectations

Effective project managers handle the issue of diminishing expectations by applying subtle, yet specific counterbalancing tactics as the ones discussed below.

6.1. Documenting and communicating change

Project managers maintain records of changes and adjustments to the plan. It is possible to indicate their use in two primary contexts: analyzing causes of delay in meeting project and operational deliverables and providing positive, substantive feedback to the steering committee. In Seattle, for example, a change log is maintained and is part of the monthly meeting agenda between the project manager and the leadership team. The Seattle change log records significant delays or adjustments to the plan.

6.2. Celebrating accomplishments

Effective project managers actively provide positive feedback to project members and stakeholders. For example, they exploit opportunities to celebrate when a milestone is reached. In Massachusetts a symbolic recognition of the effort and accomplishment is made public to all involved. This is done through a weekly message to staff by the project's director, and widely disseminated through an e-newsletter. In Seattle, major milestones are celebrated by announcing the effort and accomplishment in the project's web site.

6.3. Being thorough when explaining what will happen

Project managers skilled in managing expectations explain the details of what will occur whenever a major activity or deliverable will be executed. They implement information sharing processes so that participating social service agencies and their users receive a thorough explanation of the event or deliverable to come. They also make sure that platforms are available for recipients of the deliverable to express concerns and ask questions. In Seattle this process is addressed as a discrete project plan activity; in the state of Massachusetts this issue is addressed through training sessions and electronic feedback vehicles.

6.4. Documenting progress however small

Processes to prepare and distribute regular project progress reports are put in place. These reports indicate completed tasks, expressed concerns and unforeseen issues. The target readers of these reports are those groups or individuals who are not ultimately responsible for the project's tasks but rather those parties affected by the project and its progression. Project managers who use this accountability tactic have explained that the purpose of this is to provide objective information on the pulse of the project to involved stakeholders.

6.5. Clarifying overstated promises of functionality that take place in public forums

Effective project managers recognize the propensity of both project staff and their clients or users to overpromise and overreact. For example, they clarify overstated statements of system functionality, or inaccurate statements about the project. They do this respectfully, making sure that the misinterpretation is clarified and that the issue at hand is put in the correct context. The most effective project managers performing this type of clarification seem to always explain the rationale for the correction.

6.6. Being forthcoming about a growing 'queue' for services, activities and deliverables

Project managers sensitive about expectations closely monitor the queue for deliverables. Whenever work packages such as services, activities or deliverables begin to stack-up waiting for completion or execution, they bring it up. In Seattle, for example, a formal process exists that helps in documenting any backlogs. The project manager produces a report and provides feedback to the leadership team for prioritization of requests.

6.7. Establishing clear-open channels of communication

The city of Seattle/King County and the state of Massachusetts have developed project organizations with open communication channels. This practice is based upon the belief that users' expectations become more realistic when they understand the implementation process, its complexity and its limitations. Some communities have initiated HMIS newsletters, and others hold regular town hall meetings for this expressed purpose.

7. A strategy to deal with contradictions in human services systems implementation projects

Managing project contradictions begins with the realization that simultaneous opposites are at play. These are equally valid project goals or objectives, but their methods of attainment are at odds in practice [18–20]. Consider the following cited examples from the HMIS experience: "we must protect the
confidentiality and privacy of our clients, yet we must collect their primary identifiers”; “to be successful we must allow learning and assimilation to take place, yet we are required to collect data within an extremely short time frame”; “we all prefer to operate our HMIS at a local level; yet we have embarked on broad regional collaboration efforts”.

The following set of seemingly subtle management issues that this research has identified, provides a strategy to allow for the required flexibility to deal with simultaneous opposites. These issues are: (a) balancing actions to address conflicting goals; (b) continuous monitoring and informing; (c) realignment activities; and (d) connecting people to the project.

7.1. Balancing actions to address conflicting goals

When the systems implementation project seems to be pulled in different directions or simply when the project begins to develop inertia because progress is slow, the effective project manager steps in to bring some balance, the most critical element of success. Operationally this involves generating a clear understanding by the parties involved of the reasons for specific change actions and activities. These reflect a process of compromise or consolidation of the issues that may have caused contradiction or inertia to set in. Fundamentally, project managers exercising the balancing act engage in a social process that involves assessing the present situation and its surrounding circumstances, deciding on what route of action and new activities to take next, providing a justification for the change in direction and taking action. Pich et al. [21] refer to this process as learning and selectionism.

7.2. Monitoring and informing

Monitoring and informing imply a commitment on the part of the project management to a continuous review process that has at least two objectives. The first is to provide a formal mechanism by which stakeholders are informed of current developments and can continue to exert influence on the process. The second objective is to ensure that any new activities or change in direction are clearly understood by all the parties involved.

Establishing an effective monitoring and informing program does not need to be complicated. For example, in Massachusetts a “check-in” agenda item which is added to the regular project oversight meetings is that mechanism. A more formal procedure is the development and regular use of an “issues” list. In Seattle the issues list is a spreadsheet that is regularly updated and contains the following columns:

- The description of the issue;
- Person, agency or community reporting the issue;
- Date reported;
- Degree of urgency;
- Priority;
- Person or group responsible for its resolution;
- Actions associated with it;
- Resolution;
- Date resolved.

This monitoring process allows project managers to understand emerging issues, as well as changing requirements as the project evolves. This process is concerned with sensing the conditions surrounding the project. Ultimately the balancing act rests with the decision-making structure put in place by the project’s steering group who will decide in which direction to pull the project given the present conditions.

7.3. Realignment activities

All balancing actions carry the risk of being disruptive, especially if the balancing act involves backtracking. Consider the following example that took place in Massachusetts:

A large Continuum of Care, with diverse groups of agencies committed to the HMIS initiative, agrees to implement a broad-based case management approach. Inter-agency record sharing and service integration characterize their approach. After months of operation with a large group of pilot agencies, the steering committee agrees that the broad-based implementation approach is not producing the desired results. It is recognized that for the approach to be effective, it is necessary for all agencies and not only the pilot agencies to be on-board. A decision is made to re-focus the implementation effort in order to bring more agencies on line. It is decided that all agencies will perform only client intake and some basic case assessment. As a result, all training and support of the more comprehensive case management functions will be temporarily suspended. However, a small collaborative, which was part of the first large group of participating agencies, managed to successfully integrate a significant part of their services through the HMIS. With this change, they will not be properly supported.

Realignment activities represent the necessary efforts to bring the project back on track. These activities are, therefore, extraordinary in that they cannot be planned. The best way to describe them is as follows: “damage control.” The most effective realignment activities that the authors have observed are those which are conducted openly and explicitly as such. Using this approach, the recognition of failure is, by design, turned into a plan of action. In the example described above, the decision to curtail case management to the detriment of a few advanced users created animosity and conflict with those who were directly affected. However, the balancing act recognized the importance of two issues:
• The need to bring the entire project back on track. This was the pull from those agencies that were lagging behind.
• The need to compensate for the new limitations that were imposed by the change. This was the pull from those advanced agencies.

Realignment also occurs when significant external change affects the normal progression of the project. These changes are normally associated with known risks as well as uncertainties in the Community’s regulatory or fiscal environments. HMIS projects are dependent on these conditions. A clear example is the congressional mandate that imposes specific data collection requirements on existing systems. Also, the economic affairs of the locality impose significant influence on the HMIS project; sometimes by requiring it to contrive and other times by offering the opportunity to expand. Alignment actions are the conventional types of adjustments that project managers are forced to perform against scope, time or cost.

7.4. Connecting people to the project

Complex and diverse projects sometimes prevent people in certain roles from recognizing, and reacting positively to the dynamics at play. Much of this has to do with detachment. Comprehensive, interdisciplinary, multi-institution HMIS projects offer the project manager an additional challenge. This is the need to create a “sense of community” that permeates the group of participants through the generation of a solidifying project vision. However, if the current state of affairs surrounding the project does not allow this sense of community and shared vision to emerge, people become detached participants. In this type of situation the seemingly inconsistent balancing and alignment actions may be detrimental because they may be perceived to be too confusing or disorganized in the eyes of the participants in order for them to seriously consider being involved in the project.

Connecting people to the project can be thought of as consisting of two parallel efforts. The first is concerned with the attempts the project manager has to make to continuously achieve a mutual clarification of misunderstandings. These are explicit efforts to explain the rationale for actions. The section “managing expectations” presented earlier in this paper describes simple tactics that project managers successfully employ for this purpose. The other effort is recruitment of people to participate beyond the minimum level of obligation, with renewed energy borne out of their commitment and shared beliefs in the virtues of the project. Connecting people to the project then occurs through these continuous sense making and recruitment efforts.

8. Summary

This paper has elaborated on some key factors that contribute to the successful management of complex HSIS projects, grounded in learnings from HMIS implementations taking place across the United States. The paper elaborated on the subtle and profound issues confronting this country’s human services multi-agency system implementation projects. These environments are challenging in many ways. Project participants experience inherent contradictions and uncertainties that if not recognized, may generate enormous turbulence and difficulty to carry out the deployment. The paper explains how such projects oscillate between phases of high energy and enthusiasm and phases of enormous challenge. Tactics and a strategy to deal with these conditions were presented.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on research conducted for the Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and engagements with the City of Seattle, Washington and the state of Massachusetts. The opinions expressed in the paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of HUD or the responsible officers in Seattle and Massachusetts.

References