

UK Institute of Business Consulting Awards 09

Best International Project – WINNING PROJECT CASE STUDY

Project Title: Birds Eye Iglo Group (BEIG), Project Pioneer

SUMMARY

This project had it all!

With the separation of Birds Eye Iglo Group (BEIG) from Unilever, the business had to re-platform all its activity from telephony to reporting, across eight European countries. This included 3 factories and interfaces with 100s of suppliers, customers and logistics providers. The client switched IT partners mid-project to an unfamiliar Indian firm. Timescales were aggressive, the Executive Sponsor was new, with a skeleton team, and engagement levels ranged from exhaustion to passive-aggressive resistance. As change consultants, our brief was to ensure BEIG people were 'ready willing and able successfully to switch to the new operating environment' with minimum business disruption.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As part of this multi-million pound project, Square Peg supported the Pioneer team by developing and implementing a change management roadmap to address BEIG's transformation challenges within demanding timeframes. This was change at every level of the organisation, across all 8 countries and operations. It was much more than an IT project, but the roadmap was based on SAP and systems roll-out best practice. Our focus was on underpinning the traditional, technical *build-test-implement* timeline to prepare BEIG to operate in its new stand-alone environment. The work fell into three main categories: ***Mobilising the Project Team*** (action planning, team engagement and addressing cross-cultural management challenges), ***Engaging the Business for Delivery*** (co-ordinating local leadership & users' engagement, addressing project fatigue and planning & delivering training) and ***Providing Cross-Programme Support*** (project management, coaching, communications management, programme risk management, incident & problem management, cutover planning & implementation, and CIO advisory).

Engagement aligned with client strategy

Project failure was simply not an option – without its own systems the business would collapse. Temporary access to Unilever legacy systems had been negotiated and was under a commercial Transition Service Agreement, however this agreement was costly and finite. The transition to new systems had to be successfully managed as, once cut-over had been achieved, it would be impossible to roll-back to the legacy system.

The organisation had limited systems capability (this had previously been provided by the parent) and the project team relied heavily on business users and contractors with subject matter expertise and external IT service providers. Users within the organisation were experienced with SAP systems but this was not consistent by geography. The project had therefore to leverage the capabilities already available whilst allowing adequate focus on business as usual activities.

Change was managed

Managing change was the heart of this engagement. From the outset our plan was designed to dovetail with the build-test-implement timelines. Where the latter were not already defined, we therefore worked with the client and build partner to ensure that plans took adequate account of the people side of the change required.

Our activity was divided into a number of core themes and stages. Dividing the work into manageable chunks helped the business to focus on making progress one step at a time. We used CEO & sponsor communications to acknowledge each milestone achieved and maintain momentum. At each stage the plans and deliverables were agreed with our client, separate engagement letters were signed and weekly check-ins monitored progress. In this way the rolling engagements could be planned and reviewed as discrete pieces that nevertheless fitted into the overall flow of the project.

Stakeholders were engaged

Business users – To reach some 1,800 employees in eight countries we used a network of Country Implementation Managers (CIMs) to own and co-ordinate all local business-readiness activity. We ran an initial 1-day CIM engagement event and provided blueprints and tools (templates, key messaging etc) for the engagement work back in their numerous sites across Europe. As the project evolved, we provided dedicated resource to support and manage the CIM community's delivery.

Project team & Workstream Champions – As members of the Pioneer team we were well placed to gauge workstream champions' and team members' morale and commitment levels and to respond on a day to day level. In addition to building individual relationships, ongoing coaching and over-the-shoulder advice, we ran a number of milestone team engagement days to address potential de-railers (shifting to a new IT partner, project fatigue and under-stress behaviours, cross-cultural working etc). Towards the end of the project we also supported fortnightly and weekly project town-halls

Third-Party Partners – we ensured engagement was managed *at-the-point-of-the-relationship* by the local offices, supported by central co-ordination of key messages, milestones etc.

Exec & Board – We provided project briefing papers for Directors', Executive and Board reports. These focused on 'what you need to know' and 'decisions to be taken'. As go-live approached, this was augmented by a Square Peg-designed risk evaluation process. We also coached the Executive Sponsor on informal engagement mechanisms (elevator conversations, and incident management etc).

Project governance was in place

Square Peg helped to design the shape of the client's project team and provided resources to fill a number of roles. Where we saw threats to the mechanics or dynamics of the team we flagged these to the client. For example when our client was clearly over-stretched, we pushed back on her to devolve some decision making responsibility.

Square Peg members of the project team were accountable on a day to day basis to the Executive Sponsor and empowered to take decisions as necessary. Although requested to help, we ensured that technical, financial and legal decisions remained within the business.

Scope was managed

Defining deliverables for each element of our engagement allowed us to deliver on Square Peg's policy of 'no surprises' and to avoid scope creep. Nevertheless, operating at speed, we frequently identified gaps in the client organisation's capacity or capability levels. Our policy in those circumstances was where possible, simply to 'do what it takes' to keep the project on track, whilst flagging the gaps (see 'professional integrity' below).

As the project comprised a number of external service providers, we advised the client to establish a Suppliers' Forum to aid communication and smooth collaboration between the parties. This forum was acknowledged to be useful in swiftly addressing issues around interdependency and boundaries.

Work was planned and actively monitored

Our approach was to contract each element of the engagement on a fixed-price basis, based on detailed work-plans and estimates of level of effort required. This enabled the client to manage her budget with ease and ensured client value-for-money.

Any engagement of this size and complexity requires plans to flex. The test of our quality as consultants was the extent to which we managed our client's expectations and allowed her to stay one step ahead of emerging issues and new requirements. Throughout the engagement, Square Peg's client manager was in daily contact with our client, to help *proactively* manage new issues, thereby saving the business time and money.

Team was high performing

With a good understanding of the client organisation's culture and requirements we were able to staff the Square Peg team with trusted consultants who had the right skill-sets and attitude and who were a great cultural fit. This was a truly international team (including Irish, Australian, Canadian & British) steeped in the complexities of multi-national projects and offering multi-lingual service (French & German).

Purpose - Square Peg consultants filled specific change roles in project management, country engagement, communications and training. As the Square Peg sub-team, we established clear shared goals at the outset. These were at a meta-project level as part of our purpose was to ensure all the client teams achieved *their* purposes. We were accountable for one another's success.

Support, Trust & Communication – 'The Pegs' operated virtually from within the client's operations and quickly established regular formal and informal communication routines to collectively solve problems and identify systemic issues.

Superior expertise with complementary skill-sets – Each Square Peg was chosen for their deep expertise and relevant experience. They needed to be flexible enough to turn their hand to the demands of the day and be stretched to deliver outside of their natural remits. For instance, our project officer was called upon to create a CEO blog and our training expert was occasionally consulted on technical specifications.

Engagement delivered sustainable benefits

The proof was in the pudding. The project objective was a smooth transition to the new operating system for 1,800 users, with minimal disruption to business as usual. Business users *were* ready, willing and able to make the switch to the new environment and the legacy system was successfully switched off as planned. Though business improvement was not an explicit aim of this project, the business has gone on to demonstrate impressive performance during the subsequent 9 months, maintaining its position as UK No 1 frozen food brand (8.3 out of 10 UK households buy Birds Eye. Source: Nielsen Homescan We52 May 09).

Professional standards

Promoting consulting standards - To contribute to industry learning we have documented the whole engagement in case studies and one element in an article entitled 'Courting Disaster – how planning for failure can boost your project's chances of success', compiled with research support from MBA students at Kingston University. FinancialDirector.co.uk has expressed an interest in this. In addition, Square Peg MD Doug Ross, and BEIG CIO & HRD, Tania Howarth wrote 'IT Directors as Change Agents', presented at this year's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) conference. They are also now working on a book about this experience. Finally Doug Ross recently presented the 'Courting Disaster' work to Richmond Events IT, Finance and HR Forums.

Professional Integrity – The Square Peg approach is premised on 'no bull', excellence, and pragmatic, real-world work. Professional integrity demanded that, where we did not have expertise (eg in SAP training) we readily admitted it and sought to facilitate a quality solution from elsewhere. In fact we were trusted to assist in sourcing, pre-screening and introducing a team of multi-lingual SAP training experts. Furthermore, we did not take advantage of possible contingency fees or the opportunity to bill on time-and-materials, preferring rather to negotiate fixed-fee engagements so as to guarantee best value and 'no surprises' for the client.