



# Being There: How Missed Meetings Undermine Project Success

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## Preface – The Chronic Failure of Contemporary Project Methodologies

While project failure in the enterprise applications world has been commonplace for too long a time, clients and service providers rely on ever-evolving project methodologies as a panacea. However, a chronic failure of these methodologies is their *erroneous presumption* that positive collaboration between a systems integrator and a client project team and

management will naturally occur. Positive collaboration is mandatory as, without it, ultimate project success is unattainable and the risk of abject project failure is heightened. As evidenced by primary research, field experiences and multiple assignments as an expert witness in project litigation, a dramatic lack of harmony between service providers and their clients is at the heart of persistent project failure.

What I am referring to ranges from client resentment of consultant advice to out and out antagonism between client teams and service providers to such point that projects fail to progress with an accompanying budget over-run, time over-run, and eight to ten hours a day of gritted teeth. It is not necessarily a lack of good will on either side. Nor it is a matter of poor project methods...except for their total lack of steps to closely monitor the ongoing status of project teamwork.

Is the service provider offering sufficient knowledge transfer? Is the client coming to get that knowledge transfer? Is client management coming through with its management commitment to promote organizational change management? Is the service provider adhering to the methodology all while showing agility when it comes to changing project conditions?

To fill this gap, some reach for leadership techniques. Others go for sophisticated team-building schemes. These are of some value but do not get to the heart of the matter. Quite often, as illustrated in this article, collaboration is promoted through simpler and more direct actions that target positive collaboration.

### The Best of Intentions

In a letter about his movie “Annie Hall” Woody Allen wrote that “80 percent of success is showing up”. This oft-quoted line may well apply to showing up for meetings on the part of enterprise application project participants.

At the onset of the majority of these projects, both parties – client and service provider- have agreed, both contractually and personally, to provide a high level of management commitment to assure that the aims of the project are achieved on time and on budget.

From a client perspective, “management commitment” includes a) senior management attention and involvement in the project throughout its life cycle b) provision of sufficient infrastructure and working environment to the systems integration team and c) provision of sufficient human resource to effectively participate in the project. These are all aspects of project collaboration that should be strictly monitored (preferably on a weekly basis) through the entirety of the project.

While resource availability is traditionally documented in detail for the systems integrator side of the project, it is often merely sketched out for the client side with phrases like “client will provide needed resource on a timely basis for all defined project activities that require client participation”.

At a higher level, both the client and systems integrator agree to participate in both weekly status meetings and monthly or bi-monthly steering committee meetings. The standard agenda for such meetings is often defined in advance as well as the names of anticipated meeting attendees.

The terms of such agreements are nearly always extant in a signed Statement of Work and “management commitment” on the part of the client is a major issue for systems integrators who are highly aware of the project risks involved if clients do not fulfill their commitments of time and attention.

### **And Then the Project Begins**

Early on in projects, client staff tends to be relatively available, especially for Phase 1 which is nearly always a “preparation” phase, like a runway, before the project begins in vigor. Client members assigned to the project show up for training or orientation sessions, initial status meetings are breezed through as few serious issues arise. The first steering committee is a self-congratulatory snooze as the project is, at this point in time, utterly on budget and on-time and generally issue-free.

It is usually in a second phase that client staff begins to go AWOL, skipping meetings that involve key issues such as organizational change management or functional design/business process design. Lack of attendance may be noticed but without a numbers-based report, it can only be criticized in an anecdotal fashion. In the same vein, it should be noted that formal attendance reporting is not covered in any of the project methodologies we have seen. For these methodologies, *100% attendance is erroneously presumed.*

One of the classic situations (one that also happens to result in the most serious long-term consequences) is when assigned client representatives do not actively participate in functional design or business process design meetings. The systems integrator cannot advance without client input. This problem is further exacerbated when some client sources show up for a given meeting but others do not and later complain about decisions made in their absence. The obvious result is that functional design or blueprints are flawed or incomplete and consequent “build” phases are compromised.

We have also noted in both primary research studies as well as onsite project observation that a high number of clients complain about a lack of knowledge transfer. Sometimes, this is clearly the fault of the service providers but, equally often, we note that their rejoinder is “The client didn’t show up for scheduled training.”

There are a number of reasons why client staff miss key project meetings or fail to complete key project tasks that are assigned to them. These are the most frequent:

1. They are already swamped with their “real” jobs. (An alternative to this is that they are told by their supervisors to let the project go and get back to their “real” jobs.)
2. They did not receive sufficient knowledge transfer needed to properly participate as planned.
3. The project is falling behind time-wise and the systems integration team is told to charge ahead rather than being slowed down by client participation. (“You go ahead with it and tell us afterwards what you did”)
4. Working relations between the client team and the systems integration team have frayed and collaboration is in short supply.

When working as an expert witness in project litigation as well in the course of providing project audits and reviews, I have observed all of these situations, most especially the degradation of working relations

between client and service provider. Collaboration can collapse for a host of reasons but one of the most obvious is the failure of required client staff to attend meetings.

### **Bueller? Bueller?**

A chronic weakness of *all* project management methods has been the lack of a credible and constant tracking of the working relationship between the systems integration team and the client team. You are invited to peruse a new solution for this at [www.proq.io](http://www.proq.io) Beyond this solution, one partial but highly effective trick to maintaining project harmony is to track meeting attendance in order to drive a minimum required level of *active* project collaboration. While we have only seen this solution applied in a handful of projects, it has proven to be highly effective at keeping the team together not only for specific meetings but, by extension, across the greater scope of project collaboration. A client cannot forge ahead without guidance from their systems integrator and no one wants to the systems integrator working in a vacuum.

The most common solution makes use of a simple Excel program and provides tracking of individual meeting attendance by meeting type (example: Blueprint Design, Weekly Status, Steering Committee, Team Training...) in order to identify individual laggards.

Even more useful is reporting that summarizes attendance for all meetings:

<b>Attendance by Meeting Type</b>					
Meeting	Attendees		Record		# Meetings
	Client	Provider	Client	Provider	
Blueprint	2	1	75%	100%	4
Weekly Status	3	3	83%	100%	6
Team Training	12	3	77%	100%	4
Steering Committee	4	4	81%	94%	4
All Meetings/All Attendees			79%	99%	

Practitioners report that the mere fact of taking attendance down promotes a higher level of meeting participation and that the participation percentages tend to drop if there is a lag in gathering these figures.

Having said that, such reporting constitutes a useful project metric. How effective, for example, is a steering committee that is chronically short of attendees? Steering? Really? Is that an iceberg? It might be wise to add a minimum level of tolerance for attendance levels depending upon the relative importance of the meetings being measured. Following the example of the steering committee, one might establish that a minimum acceptable level of participation could be established as 85%.

We recommend that you adopt the attitude that meetings are formal “collaboration points” that are intrinsic to project success and that you include a high attendance level as a success criterion that will help you to achieve the goals of “on-time” and “on-budget”, not to mention “bringing measurable benefit to the client”.

**About the Author:** A leading authority on enterprise applications and projects, Michael Doane has forty-two years of business and information systems experience in industry, consulting, and industry analysis as well having served as an expert witness in seven project litigations. His deep research into the best practices for projects is at the heart of ProQ ([www.proq.io](http://www.proq.io)), a groundbreaking project teamwork monitoring system that provides a credible and easy-to-administer project insurance. He can be reached at [michael@proq.io](mailto:michael@proq.io) or [michael@michaeldoane.com](mailto:michael@michaeldoane.com)