

The Client/Designer Interface: the MPA 18th Annual Conference, **held at Latimer House Conference Centre, Chesham, Bucks, on 28–29 September 2000**

MPA events are confidential. They provide a forum where someone involved in a major project can tell it the way it was. This summary is available to both members and non-members, and care has been taken to ensure that its contents do not breach confidentiality. This account cannot, therefore, do full justice to the event, so members please read the full proceedings when you receive them. Best of all, members, come to the events. Non-members, think about joining!

Participants

Over 50 participants attended the seminar and the following organizations were represented:

Arup Project Management, BAA Plc, Baker & McKenzie, Balfour Beatty Major Projects, Bechtel Ltd, Bovis Lend Lease Consulting, British Energy, British Telecom, Brown & Root Services, Costain Group, European Investment Bank, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, George Corderoy & Co, High-Point Rendel, Lockheed Martin Integrated Systems, MACE Ltd, Ministry of Defence, Mott MacDonald, Mouchel, MTR Corporation Ltd, National Grid Company, National Air Traffic Services Ltd, National Audit Office, PA Consulting, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Rail Link Engineering, Shadow Strategic Rail Authority, Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd, Thames Water Utilities Ltd, Union Railways (South) Ltd, Union Railways, Willis Ltd, WS Atkins Ltd.

Getting the client/designer interface right is an essential first step to project success. Get it wrong, and you will be throwing valuable resources at clarifying the requirements after detailed design has started, working in a culture of blame or ending up with a project that does not function adequately. Against a background of changing procurement practices, the briefing process must be continuing, collaborative and meticulously managed.

Speakers drew on experience of projects in construction, defence and IT to suggest how the interface is best managed. Participants brought their own wider experience to bear on the questions and the results of a questionnaire survey, conducted at the conference, show their priorities for good interface management (see boxes on page 2).

At the front end of a project

- Make sure the business case has been established and that the designer understands it
- Identify the client's requirements—in a multiple client (as in defence), the client must ensure that the various layers, especially the end-users, have a proper input through the right channels
- Develop the strategic brief
- Explore and exploit the benefits of innovation (but see caveat, "Promises and pitfalls", over)
- Clarify the affordability constraints—the designer may need to explain to the client how much his money will buy
- In repeat projects with the same client, evaluate the last project to see the lessons learnt—it is easier to be receptive to hard lessons which represent not an acrimonious post mortem but a way forward to an improved solution
- Invest time upfront—make sure that all pre-project work has been done thoroughly (with whole-life costings if required) before the working drawings are started; remember that quality time spent at the beginning can lead to significant savings later on
- Get the right mix of talent and personalities in the project or production teams—and don't be afraid to empower those who have talent.

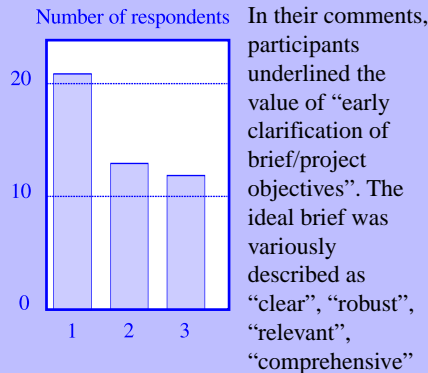
As the project progresses

- Put in place a change control process
- Bridge the culture gap between client and designer—the designer may need to educate an inexperienced client
- Be prepared to be flexible if the function requirement has to be modified—designers shouldn't bully the client into accepting an immutable design freeze

Key principles affecting the interface

Participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire. In their responses, they identified the following as the three most significant factors:

- 1 = clear brief/business objectives/specification
- 2 = decision freeze/change control
- 3 = competence of client

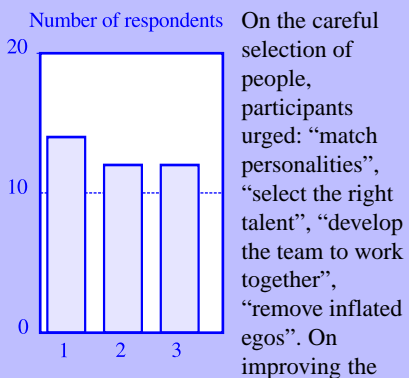


and (conversely) “concise”. The brief or design should be “frozen at the proper time”, within “mutually agreed deadlines” and any changes must be “project driven”. The problems encountered with an inexperienced client were highlighted: “does the client know what he wants?” and “the uninformed client does not appreciate technical issues”.

Key actions

The top three recommendations were:

- 1 = people selectivity/team building
- 2 = focus of business objectives
- 3 = improve communications



focus of business objectives, participants said, “focus on the business, not the hard project” and “the designer must understand the client’s business case”. To achieve good communications, an “open honest environment”, “Web-based communications” and a “properly qualified communications manager” were all recommended.

- Distinguish between major and minor changes in the design change process
- Recognize the opportunities that will enable that design to be optimized in the project, and identify those which, because of time and other constraints, should be saved for the next project
- Ensure that instructions to the designer are correctly conveyed through the primary client, so that the designer is not bombarded with input from all sides.

As the project concludes

- For project owners, a project has an ongoing life cycle—be prepared for briefing to continue into the later phases
- Evaluate the project outcome, looking at product (does the project achieve its specification?), process (how did the team perform?) and performance (have user expectations been met?)
- Foster a learning culture and ensure that information gained on the project is fed back into the system.

Tools and techniques

Some of the following may be useful for your project:

- See that IT is being used to the full, through the Internet, Extranets and an Intranet, a common database and so on
- Appoint a design brief/interface manager
- Bring the operating company to the table early on
- If it’s right for your industry, use virtual reality to allow rapid prototyping
- Set up an integrated project team
- Try reverse briefing if this will allow a cost-effective solution or spark ideas (in reverse briefing, you work from an existing project by asking how the new project should differ from the old one)
- Ensure that experience is passed on through knowledge management and training
- Consider using incentives or partnering to motivate those who are delivering the project
- Make sure that your review process checks that the implementation reflects what the end-user is looking for.

Promises and pitfalls

Innovation is both an opportunity and a threat. If well managed at the client/designer interface, it offers cost-effective solutions, a sharper competitive edge and quality improvements—some of them real winners. If badly controlled, it leads down a road of high risk, innovation for its own sake and lack of realism.

Co-location is another double-edged sword. Cutting one way, it allows good working relations, a team culture and constant informal meetings. Cutting the other way, it entails interruptions, a waste of the designer’s time and the loss of a designer to a single project for too long.