

Why Projects Fail: The Passport Office

In the summer of 1999 the failure of the Passport Office's new IT system caused huge delays in the issue of passports, several hundred people were unable to travel, and phone lines were continually congested.

What went wrong?

A report on the problem blamed over-optimistic planning of the implementation of the new system. The cost of producing a passport also rose. A risk had been taken by introducing the new system in 2 of the 6 passport offices before it was properly tested.

The report into the failure highlighted:

- failure to assess the time needed by staff to become familiar with new manual and computerised systems
- unrealistic risk assessment and insufficient contingency planning
- a failure to communicate effectively with the public at a personal level, by phone and through the media

What were the lessons learned?

A number of the lessons indicate that closer attention to project management techniques could have mitigated the failures.

In particular, the main lessons were:

- new systems must be thoroughly tested
- staff must be fully trained and adequate time allowed to learn new processes
- realistic contingency plans are required should the project fail to deliver on time
- the customers, or end users, of the system – in this case the general public, must be kept well informed

A major lesson from this failure appears to be the need for contingency planning. The project took some high risk decisions without having fall-back plans. The Passport Office had not predicted the surge in applications and enquiries and had no means of handling them.

From National Audit Office summary at <http://www.nao.gov.uk/pn/9899812.htm>

Full report at http://www.nao.gov.uk/publications/nao_reports/9899812.pdf