

Managing Interactive Media

Industry Interviews



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Peter Bennett is founder and CEO of London Translations Limited & Ozone Conferencing Limited and has over 15 years experience of international project management for major oil companies and telecoms carriers.

What is the top insight you have now about people working in interactive projects that you've got from your experience and would like to pass on to the next generation of Interactive Media Project Workers?

Having worked in major Oil Companies and Telecommunications Carriers running large IT infrastructure projects using formal project management methodologies, the one thing which always amazes me is the unstructured way in which project teams approach Interactive Media Projects – often with predictable results.

As a translation company, we are often contacted by project managers needing parts of the products they are working on translated into other languages when it is far, far too late for the work to be completed within their deadlines. I don't blame project managers for this, we work with some very good people, it's just that localization is a complex business which is not well understood by many people outside the industry. Our advice is to contact your translation agency as soon as you know you will need their help so they are involved early in the process.

What do you see as the wider context of interactive electronic media and the way things are heading for your sector's area – e.g. rise of iTV, citizen journalism, podcast etc.?

I see a decentralized media as a good thing for our industry and international trade as a whole. Indeed, at the risk of sounding sensational, I'd go as far as to say that it will have a pivotal role in shaping the global economy in the next decade.

I recently spent several months in China and, even though the State still controls old media channels, many of the younger generation are interacting with the west via on-line channels. The authorities still attempt to close down access but they are fighting a losing battle (I accessed the US Google and other restricted sites by tunneling through to London). The clock is ticking on central control which means governments will no longer be able to keep their citizens in the dark or silent.

Getting and retaining business can be time consuming and sometimes costly. Do you have a view on any or all of A) pitch/tender process, B) Preferred supplier lists, C) ongoing/return business D) attracting business through the door, E) Internal clients

I'll answer these in the order they are asked however, as our clients are all external I'd like to skip the last question if I may.

A) Pitch/Tender process: Despite traditional project management disciplines not being applied to many interactive media projects there is still a tendency for companies to go through standard tendering procedures. This highlights a dichotomy here between how different parts of the organization view such cutting edge initiatives. The Project Managers will, quite rightly in many instances, claim that a traditional rigid project methodology can't be used as there is no precedent for what they are trying to achieve and they just have to do what ever it takes to get the job done and solve problems as they are identified along the way. The contracts department is uncomfortable with that approach as the only way to charge for such work is on a time and materials basis which leads to open ended costs. Often companies will force supplier to commit to a fixed cost which ends in disaster as the supplier goes under trying to deliver or pulls out and the project never gets finished. A sensible tender will break complex projects down into quantifiable chunks with acceptance milestones and contingency provision.

B) Preferred supplier lists: Preferred supplier lists work very well where they are in place and in place for the right reason. I am always surprised at the lack of centralized purchasing in many large organizations. I could name a dozen large corporates which we regularly work for where individuals have unilaterally searched for us on the internet and placed individual orders with us when we have been, unbeknown to them, serving their colleagues for years. We obviously point this out to them but in most cases, there is no concept of a preferred supplier list so they miss out on the savings which consolidated purchasing affords.

As the number of companies who serve those in the interactive media space is relatively small and given the difficulties of identifying good suppliers, where there is a preferred supplier list, being used once and doing a good job often guarantees a place. Incumbents have a massive advantage over new suppliers pitching for business as regular supplier appraisals often do not include suppliers of complex professional services.

Getting projects off the ground is often problematic for a variety of reasons. Do you have any insights into defining and planning the stages of a project?

I put many of the difficulties down to the large proportion of relatively young, creative people in the industry who do not come from a process driven, project based engineering background. Some of the best results I have seen is where an experienced project manager applies the basic principles from one of the recognized project management methodologies such as PrinceII but adapts it to the creative and dynamic environment of interactive projects. The role the Project Manager is often undervalued and just given as a title to the person who holds the purse strings but has no training or experience. For instance, if someone with no training or experience is assigned the role of, say, Graphic Designer or C++ programmer, it would be about 5 minutes before it is obvious to everyone that they are the wrong person for the job. If they the same person the role of Project Manager, it could be the day before the deadline that it finally becomes apparent they were not up to the job – by which time it is too late.

Working out the cost of proposed new projects – any advice?

Always do a best case, worst case and expected case project plan and build in some contingency. As a basic principle, the more ground breaking and innovative the project the higher chance of overrun, 150% or more is not unusual.

Defining the quality level of projects – any advice?

Quality is often used as a rather nebulous term which is taken to assume "having done a good job". Again, I feel it is worth going back to engineering principles and deciding what the expected tolerances are. A statement that "the content will stream in less than 56kbs" is much better than "the content will be downloadable over the internet".

What have been the top two difficulties that occurred in developing projects from your knowledge and what is the best way to address these?

- ◆ Lack of specification. "Just do it" is fine so long as you are happy with indeterminate results in a flexible timescale. Much better to define what you want and when you need it by before you set out to build it, then you know when it's finished and if it's on time.
- ◆ Lack of planning and stewardship: If you have a properly constructed project plan which is regularly updated you'll see the issues ahead of time before they become problems and you can avoid them. News is usually only bad news when it's late news.

How much and what type of testing of the product should take place before release?

Difficult to comment on the type as that will vary by project but always leave plenty of time for testing and don't confuse testing time with contingency time. Also, build in time for retesting should the original testing highlight issues - which is likely to do otherwise there would be no point in testing in the first place.

Interactive teams have special characteristics that make them a challenge to manage. What advice would you give from your knowledge and experience about teams and making their management smoother?

Simple. Mutual respect and cooperation between creative people, technical people and Project Managers. Each have a vital role to play if the project is to be successful. I always tell my team that the word "Management" describes a job role and should not taken as a statement of status. To use a military analogy, the Project Manager Provides 'air cover' to the troops doing the 'real' work to stop senior management dropping unexpected bombs on them.