

Too Busy To Learn?
by Richard Pharro

A report has recently been published on the £6.2bn [National Programme for IT](#) in the NHS. It suggests that the project is running behind time and has not been well received due to opposition from medical staff, who claim to have not been consulted on the suitability and ease of use of this new technology. The Standish Group's [CHAOS Report](#) of 1994 and its latest report of 2003 identify 10 reasons why projects fail, user involvement being high on the list. It would therefore appear that in the period between the publication of the two reports, nothing has changed.

It is not as though there are limited opportunities for project teams to introduce lessons learned from previous projects. There are many opportunities throughout the project life cycle. During the start-up phase the team should be considering strategic, project and operational issues. As very few decisions on how the project will be implemented have been made, this provides an ideal opportunity for them to introduce both explicit and implicit lessons learned from previous projects. Probably the greatest contribution to a projects' success lies in ensuring that the start-up process is formal, well thought out and well executed.

Throughout the course of the project there are likely to be review points during which completion of the preceding phase and work for the succeeding phases are planned. In organisations undertaking projects with similar technology, these review points – often accompanied by peer reviews of issues like design, risk and quality – provide a good opportunity to identify lessons learned from previous projects and to generate some payback for the sponsoring organisation.

For those people who believe that lessons learned have to be conducted in a formal environment, or indeed at certain stages during the project life cycle, there are in fact numerous opportunities presented during normal day-to-day work. This could be in discussions, meetings, training events and the normal interaction that takes place between members of the team – but it would appear that these opportunities are rarely taken.

Some organisations insist that at the end of a project a formal lessons learned report is produced and archived for staff to use in the future. However, the majority of project teams are usually too busy to complete a thorough lessons learned report, and many project managers are too excited by the lure of the next project to pay due attention to this activity. Bearing in mind the effort expended on delivering a project, the payback earned from spending a few days reflecting on successes and failures is high. It beggars belief that these lessons are not carried forward to future projects, at both the individual and organisation level, and that this opportunity is not instilled as a key performance indicator in any project manager's appraisal process.

Are the shortcomings in learning lessons due to a lack of understanding of the power of considered thought, or do too many project managers believe that the traditional planning cycle of plan–do–check–review ceases at the 'do' stage when related to projects? Bearing in mind the billions of pounds spent on projects each year, the opportunities afforded by learning from our mistakes often go unheeded. There must be some fundamental reason why this is not accomplished in a consistent and professional way. The only conclusion we can draw is that we are simply too busy to learn.