Project Management Institute.

Risk, Resiliency and Reconsideration: Program Management Post-Pandemic

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Topics: Construction, PMO, Strategy

That COVID-19 and its aftermath will change the architecture, engineering and construction (AEC) industry is a given. We are already seeing long-term effects of the pandemic in how organizations from auto manufacturers to research universities manage supply chains, how contractors plan their equipment purchases and fleet management, and how designers are incorporating the lessons learned of the pandemic into airports, schools and other public gathering places.

These and other changes will be long-lasting and will undoubtedly have ripple effects throughout the industry, many of which we will not fully understand for many months (if not years or decades). However, there is an area where we are experiencing first-hand the “new normal” of the post-pandemic construction world: program management practices.

Prior to the pandemic, owners understood how a robust, well-planned program could help keep multiple, interrelated projects in sync, on time and within budget. A comprehensive, holistic program management approach realizes efficiencies, identifies priorities and reduces risk and uncertainty when undertaking a program. It can also deliver significant cost and schedule benefits through the use of proven management tools and techniques, program management information system (PMIS) software, and other methodologies.

The pandemic certainly demonstrated these benefits in many ways, but also forced the industry to reconsider certain givens about program management best practices. What will program management look like as vaccinations continue and re-openings ramp up? What is the new normal for construction program management?

Having worked with program managers across a wide variety of industries, I see five distinct ways the practice of program management is changing in the wake of COVID-19:

1. Resiliency of operations: The ability to continue business despite adverse conditions is now a standard program management offering. Clients expect their program managers to provide experts with solid decision support processes and tools to understand how disruptions to future operations can be anticipated, avoided, minimized and/or mitigated.

A key difference in resiliency pre-pandemic and post is on the duration of the impact: Prior to COVID-19, owners prepared for relatively temporary disruptions, such as those caused by an earthquake, hurricane or man-made incident—but now understand they must be prepared for longer-term (even permanent) disruptions. These disruptions may necessitate duplication of functions as well as more resilient facilities.

2. Reconsidering co-location: *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)* emphasizes the intangible benefits of co-locating a project or program management team, but COVID-19 forced clients to rethink the routine standard of co-locating program team members. New, but now proven, collaboration technologies changed the benefit-to-cost equation for colocation.

Going forward, owners will be less willing to pay for travel and relocation expenses, a common practice pre-pandemic. Dispersed teams not only reduce program management costs, but they also make available a wider range of talent by allowing remote support from team members unwilling to move to the client’s location.

3. Data centralization: For programs encompassing projects across a wide geographic area—especially those organizations with truly global programs—the pandemic forced owners to standardize and centralize their data to ensure all stakeholders had access to current, accurate information in the same format.

In many cases, PMIS investments earned back their start-up costs with remarkable speed as having a recognized data depository used by properly trained stakeholders enabled informed decision making from a distance. We can expect organizations to be more willing to consider new PMIS investments, or to enhance their current PMIS tools going forward.

4. Prioritizing communication and collaboration: Although program management team colocation may now be seen as a luxury rather than a necessity by owners, the value of constant and clear communication and collaboration was proven time and again as the key to successful management during COVID-19.

Developing, implementing and enforcing a formal communications management plan will be a standard program management practice in the post-pandemic world, as owners experienced the importance of a regular and codified information exchange protocol first-hand.

5. Risk management: COVID-19 presented a classic “known unknown.” That is, a risk widely understood as a possibility but that was difficult to validate, let alone quantify. Post-pandemic, owners will expect their program managers to use the pandemic, at a minimum, as a high-water mark in identifying disruption risks going forward.

Program managers capable of extrapolating the lessons learned of the pandemic to other types of truly systemic risks (dramatic changes in government or accelerating climate change impacts, for example) will offer their clients a distinct advantage over those who treat the pandemic as a black swan-type event. Known unknowns of all types can and do occur during multi-year programs, and owners who proactively manage these risks will be better positioned not only to weather the next disruption, but to capitalize on the opportunities presented.

As program managers, it is our responsibility to consider the impacts of COVID-19 to the organizations we support, and to provide the meaningful, actionable advice to help our clients realize their program goals. Emphasizing resiliency, reconsidering the cost-benefit analysis of co-location, stressing the value of data centralization and formal communication plans, and incorporating the lessons learned of the pandemic into our risk management plans will drive value through the programs we support—and help our clients achieve their visions for their businesses and institutions.

*Hill Vice President **Randall (Randy) B. Richardson, PMP** has more than 38 years of experience delivering major programs across a wide range of market sectors. Prior to joining Hill, Randy was managing 10 senior program managers in the U.S., Panama and Korea with a combined portfolio valuing more than $20 billion. His expertise includes developing programs consistent with strategic goals to solve client challenges, as well as building and leading successful program teams by combining resources and technologies with effective governance structures.*