

THE SPONSOR: ONE OF THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD ROLES IN MAJOR PROJECTS



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 16th June 2021

Project sponsors occupy something of a Cinderella role in major projects; one that is fundamental to the project story but one that is misunderstood, put upon and lonely in equal measure. The Major Projects Association recognises this challenge, and in running this event and the associated project sponsorship network, is seeking to explore the role, capabilities and experience of sponsors in all their forms.

'A key role of the sponsor is as the glue on a major project. Connecting people, representing the project, anticipating issues and facilitating solutions before they have an impact ... all activity for which you will rarely get credit.'

Mike Smith, Programme Director Restoring Your Railways, Network Rail Ltd

The seminar shone a light on some of the key skills and behaviours of project sponsors, and discussed:

1. The experience of the sponsor and the emotional and physical pressures they face.
2. The various levels of capability and experience required of the different models of sponsorship across diverse projects and industries.
3. Routes in and out of the role and potential career paths.
4. Support and development needs and opportunities.

DIFFERENT SPONSORSHIP MODELS

Just as projects and programmes differ substantially across contexts, so the role and requirement of the sponsor is different and varied.

At **Transport for London (TfL)** sponsorship is provided by a dedicated sponsorship function, involving full-time sponsors who benefit from a clearly defined pathway model through the entire project life cycle, and a career path. Whilst the role of the sponsor is essentially consistent from project to project, the characteristics of a programme place an emphasis on particular skills. For example, asset sponsorship involves less stakeholder management and benefits from higher levels of data maturity and availability; whereas the sponsorship of environment programmes involves multiple clients and end-users, and project benefits that are less tangible and harder to quantify.

The **Astute Submarine Programme** involves delivery of a hugely complex product, over an extended timescale (each submarine takes ten years to build) and with a highly complex network of oversight, suppliers and other

stakeholders. This programme uses a partnership model of sponsorship in which a Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) works with the Submarine Delivery Authority and a triumvirate of key suppliers (BAE, Babcock and Rolls-Royce) for whom the scale of the programme and the implications of success or failure require that each operates with their own internal sponsors. Many of the sponsor activities, such as forecasting and horizon-scanning, risk/opportunity management and change management, are highly collaborative across the main stakeholders. This depends on a behavioural charter to ensure transparency, candid but respectful challenge, and an ability to balance the needs for professional co-working against those for commercial distance.

Other projects, such as those associated with Parliament's **Restoration and Renewal** or the **Transforming Digital Programmes**, do not use dedicated sponsors but draw on members of staff whose main role is not that of sponsorship.

'When choosing a suitable sponsor, think not just who is available but also whether you need a knowledgeable SRO to coach a less experienced team, or whether you have an expert team where a sponsor with a lack of prior technical knowledge, but with the requisite self-assurance can ask difficult questions of the team and encourage innovative thinking.'

Tracey Jessup, Chief Digital and Information Officer, UK Parliament

IMPACT OF THE SPONSOR'S BEHAVIOUR

'The ability of any project to go faster is highly dependent on strong sponsorship.'

Kerry Bangle, Principal Consultant, The Nichols Group

The way in which a sponsor shows understanding and empathy for the needs of the project, the business and the stakeholders, and the way they fulfil their role can be extraordinarily influential for a project or programme. For example:

Governance and approvals are often seen as hampering decision-making and slowing progress to no real advantage. A skilled sponsor will assess exactly what governance is needed for a project and will seek to streamline, combine or innovate to ensure governance is as enabling as possible. **Sellafield's recent G6 model for governance and regulation** is cited as an illustration.

Balance and challenge are two important elements for the sponsor as facilitator: the ability to understand how and where requirements impact cost and benefits and when they add value, and the skill to handle the ambiguity and the nuance in those decisions; and equally, the courage to challenge if things look as if they may be going in the wrong direction or if something is unclear or does not seem to make sense.

Providing ‘air cover’ for the delivery team by intercepting things that might otherwise divert them from their task and providing an umbrella against political or other unwarranted stakeholder pressure, without ever relieving them of their accountability.

Being the heart and soul of the project by championing the business case and the benefits, and providing the energy and dynamism to sustain everyone involved at those times when the project is challenged or motivation is waning.

SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPING THE SPONSOR

The Cinderella nature of the role means that organisations can provide the most immediate support to their sponsors by providing clarity on their role, both for the sponsor and to the wider organisation.

The behaviours and capabilities of the sponsor are very different from those associated with other aspects of project management and delivery. Moreover, they are poorly defined and largely overlooked in the bodies of knowledge covering the project discipline. This is particularly true for those expected to fulfil the role of sponsor as an adjunct to their main functional role.

Whilst organisations such as TfL have established a model and aspire to the professional sponsor role, and others, such as BAE Systems, have partnered with Manchester Business School to develop a ‘Sponsoring Complex Programmes’ module for their staff, formal training and development opportunities for sponsors remain rare.

The Association’s own informal research conducted at a recent round-table discussion highlighted the need for clear guidance on the role in general, and specifically on managing benefits across the whole life cycle or addressing project guidance.

The round-table findings were echoed by speakers during the seminar where there was a call for:

- Opportunities for junior sponsors to attend funding and other decision-making meetings as observers.
- Formal coaching and mentoring networks.
- Access to case studies and lessons learned.
- A community of practice and peer assist network.

THE POWER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The complexity of the sponsor’s role and the lack of clarity associated with it (amongst both sponsors and their organisations) is matched only by the significance of the role in major projects and the power and influence sponsors wield in terms of establishing the culture of a project and values that underpin it.

‘As a sponsorship community don’t underestimate our immense collective power, and our moral duty.’

Dr Jo Jolly, Deputy Director, Environment Agency

This means that sponsors are perhaps the best placed of anyone in major projects to champion the intangibles and ensure that *all* major projects are drivers of change on the issues that really matter.

POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- What simple steps could you take to clarify the role and responsibilities of sponsors within your project/programme?
- What else could you do to support sponsors with benefits realisation once a project has been handed to operations?

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