Assurance 2030 – Creating a Project Assurance Profession

Highlights

Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 3rd November 2021

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Introduction

Assurance in projects has been around for a long time. However, traditionally it has been fragmented, with specific aspects of a project (e.g. technical, safety and quality) being assured by specialists in those areas somewhat in isolation from each other.

Furthermore, those specialists typically do not see themselves as project professionals; they are quality assurers, internal auditors, etc., and subject to ways of working and reporting lines that lie outside of project management.

Integrated assurance approaches have been an attempt to bring together these disparate assurance providers into single frameworks, but with limited success. What has been emerging in recent years is a breed of project professionals whose sole job is to provide integrated assurance on a project, or more typically, a number of projects.

They may originate from more specialised areas of assurance, or from specific delivery roles, but now their perspective is different: it is the success of the entire project that they are interested in, not just specific aspects.

This seminar explored what is needed to ensure that major project assurance is provided efficiently and effectively by competent people following robust and effective processes against known standards. It also explored whether we need to recognise a distinct project assurance profession?

What is assurance?

Robert Buttrick encouraged us to *'Consider assurance as a framework, not as a structure, process, a review or role.'*

The term 'framework' in respect of governance and assurance is more holistic as it can encompass anything relevant, including policy, processes, guidance, roles and structure.

This term is now being used in many formal standards, most recently in BS ISO 37000:2021 Governance of Organizations – Guidance.

In the relationship between governance, assurance and risk, Buttrick says we should consider that: *'Assurance and risk are close cousins and both are just two aspects, among many, of good governance.'*



(Robert Buttrick, Director, Project Workout Limited)

In the opening pages of *Good Governance, A Code for the Voluntary and Community Sector* (2001) Dame Suzi Leather, former Chair of the UK's Charity Commission said: *'The central importance of good governance to all sectors of the economy is now clearer than ever. The crisis which beset our financial system has highlighted how dangerous a tick-box approach can be. Truly good governance has to be lived.'*

In other words, it is about *being* good not just *looking* good – starting at the top of an organisation. If during a review or audit, or when reporting progress, you, as a leader or manager, hide vital information, you are only fooling yourself. Those organisations whose people embrace honest communication can use audits, reviews and everyday reporting as an opportunity to remove roadblocks and improve performance.

'It's getting involved right at the beginning. And that way one can exert the appropriate influence and be seen as a partner to support the delivery of that business case through governance.'

Jonathan Clarke, Group Assurance Director, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority

How do we get value from assurance?

Toby Robins of Network Rail summarised the eternal question on assurance: *'What is assurance going to do for me?'* and confessed that he often felt like a 'snake oil salesman' when trying to 'sell' the benefits. In truth, different stakeholders get different benefits and value from assurance activities.

How stakeholders react to assurance reviews is a key indicator of the likely value it will bring. Do they welcome it and act on its recommendations? Or are they defensive and secretive? Making sure that people see that reviews are not a tick-box exercise but a way to unlock issues and drive improvement is key. A good assurance professional must excel at being a critical friend and being able to deliver both good and bad news in a sensitive and supportive manner.

The delegates were asked to consider three questions.

Do we need an assurance competency framework?

'Overwhelmingly, yes!' said delegates in discussing the concept and the benefits. Jonathan Clarke of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) explained how a competency framework gave them confidence in risk and assurance capability, and was pivotal to their approach of developing 'bench strength' in assurance professionals that could deliver activities that complemented business needs.

'Ask not what Assurance can do for you but what you can do for Assurance.'

Jonathan Clarke, Group Assurance Director, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority



- Clarity on what assurance is required, why and for whom
- Support for the project's outputs and outcomes
- Measurable effectiveness and value
- Acting on findings

(Toby Robins, Head of P3M Assurance, Network Rail Ltd)

It was acknowledged that there were already some high-level frameworks being developed and that it would give greater credibility to build on those, rather than reinvent the wheel. Having a competency framework was acknowledged as being a step towards assurance as a profession and would help with recruitment and creating balanced teams. Creating a framework that is applicable to those who are not full-time assurance professionals, for example technical or design leads, is also important.

Do we need an assurance standard?

'Yes and no!' summarised the Chair in response to the view of delegates. A standard would clarify the role of assurance, drive standardisation and make a clearer contract between assured and assurer.

'Assurance needs to be closer to the project and progressive. More like an ongoing partnership than just formal gate reviews.'

Tony Robins, Head of P3M Assurance, Network Rail

However, many felt that a code of practice or set of guidelines would be more appropriate than a dedicated standard, as there would be an opportunity to ensure that assurance better reflected existing standards as they came up for review.

- **BS 6079**
- **GovS 002**
- **ISO 21500 family**

Ultimately it was recognised that it is often the behaviours and soft skills of the assurance professional or assessor which heavily influence the effectiveness and value of the assurance activity. These behaviours are very hard to capture in a standard or code of practice.

Do we need recognition of an assurance profession?

'At HS2 we have an advisory framework, incorporating consultancy and advisory services, that we can call on in order to support action owners to close out assurance recommendations.'

Pamela Stacey, Head of Programme & Corporate Assurance, HS2

The Chair challenged the delegates to reflect on whether they were truly ready for a professional body or if there should be more of a focus on accreditation.

Jonathan Clarke commented that the NDA's approach of creating a diverse bench of assurance individuals might be diluted by a professional body that focused on standardisation of the profession. However, there was still a valuable role for a forum to bring together professionals and share good practice.

Many felt that there was already a large number of professional bodies, so an additional one was not required. One delegate captured the feeling as follows, *'We are mostly accidental assurance reviewers who by dint of experience or expertise get pulled together to do assurance reviews. Hence, I don't think we are at place of sufficient maturity to create a profession, but we may be able to do more around accreditation.'*

Points for further discussion

- As assurance relies on project management expertise, how can we better upskill project managers with the softer skills required for assurance?
- How can we build a greater awareness of the importance of assurance in delivering decarbonisation at project, programme and portfolio levels?

Chair

Pamela Stacey, Head of Programme & Corporate Assurance, HS2

Contributors

Robert Buttrick, Director, Project Workout Limited
Jonathan Clarke, Group Assurance Director, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
Gary Flanagan, Deputy Director Assurance and Systems Learning, Infrastructure and Projects Authority
Toby Robins, Head of P3M Assurance, Network Rail Ltd

Participating Organisations

AECOM
Alliance Manchester Business School
AWE
BAE Systems
Costain Ltd
HS2
Infrastructure and Projects Authority
Jacobs
KPMG LLP
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Major Projects Association
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For further information contact the Major Projects Association at:
mpa@majorprojects.org

01865 818030
www.majorprojects.org