I am writing to comment on the recent committee meeting. About me - I am a programme manager in R&D electronics and telecoms with Swedish training in project and programme governance via my employer. I have seen plenty of howlers in my time, and still have to fight to stop them happening (sometimes I cannot). One of my chants is "late changes kill projects".

COMMITTEE

I was interested to hear that having split the original big-bang timetable release into 4 releases spread over May 2018 to Dec 2019, that the May 2018 release went so horribly wrong.

I was very surprised to hear the chair of IRB to state that one reason for failure of the May 2018 release was the introduction of late changes, and then further confused when he said "that if the late changes were not accommodated then the travelling public would have to wait 18 months...". This last statement is very strange, when he had previously stated that there were to be 3 more releases.

2 pieces of best practice seem not to have been followed:

1) Introducing/allowing late changes: We get this nonsense all the time from executives, owners, founders, so called "impact" managers etc. How old is this, how many defence projects have gone to pot due to evolving changes in specification (don't go there). How many government software projects have gone to pot due to evolving requirements (don't go there either).

2) Not spotting so called "agile" practice, and following the rules around agile. The splitting up of the Big-Bang into 4 releases could be considered as Agile, where agile has a fixed date to release something that is tested and will definitely work. This replaces trying to slip the date around while trying to fit in EVERYTHING, because usually this is very late and doesn't work cleanly, and consumes all your best people fixing stuff that is now "out there" (sounds familiar).
Pure Agile was invented by the software industry (see 1) above) - we see this with the frequent updates to the Apps on our smartphones - tiny changes every week with new features or bug fixes. Rarely is an app put out that has to be completely withdrawn - it still happens, but at least it is quickly withdrawn back to the previous working version. Frequent releases helps to fend off the "Late Change Brigade" because they should get their change request in about 1.5 to 3 months. (the recent TSB / Lloyds internet banking fiasco is incredible).

Obviously, rail timetables cannot do weekly changes, but it now seems that they have these 6 monthly releases, i.e. the May cycle and the December cycle. If you are going to adopt bits of agile practice, then you have to be medieval about introducing late changes into a release, and ruthless about taking OUT changes that will threaten the resilience of the release.
OBSERVATIONS:
a) Somebody was over optimistic and misled the IRB that there would be tens of cancellations for a few weeks (10s of cancellations is not a big deal);
b) The IRB were not smart enough to spot the reckless optimism regarding the driver training and the resultant rosta. OR, they were bullied into accepting late changes/high risk. There is an open question about Just in Time (JIT) driver training, the availability of simulators etc. and making time for drivers to get training instead of driving trains.
I went to a talk about Crossrail in summer 2016 at Surrey University - their (TfL) critical path was to recruit 200 drivers into their pool, and to get ALL of them trained and ready-for-go in December 2018. Trained driver pools are very important. Obviously it is easier for Crossrail as there will be no live services on the track in the months beforehand, and they don't share it with other TOCs. Perhaps ask them (TfL) what they think about driver training?

c) The IRB were unable to stop it happening i.e. cancel the May 2018 timetable release. The committee could perhaps check if there was any pressure to push on regardless (cf Challenger shuttle disaster where they bullied the expert to reverse their previous "not OK for launch" to eventually agree it would be OK, and pressed on with the space-shuttle launch to meet the breakfast TV schedules when the experts had been saying "delay" due to freezing overnight temperatures).

d) Competence in the rail industry: I went to a rail talk at the IET in May/June and the greeting room was full of veterans who were "helping out" on a freelance basis. Clearly, the guys who know how the network operates are getting thin on the ground, and putting in "management consultants" is not going to work (like it hasn't with the NHS).

Good luck with getting the IRB minutes - that cover-up was shocking - who's money is paying for this stuff? You may even find out who bullied the IRB with their reckless optimism about driver training. None of them should get a golden handshake goodbye.

Good luck for the "repaired timetable" on the 15th of July.

Best regards,
Clive Johnson. Guildford, Surrey.

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