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## Titanic lessons for modern projects

Posted by Martin Gosden on 5 December, 2011 - 12:57

The South Wales and West of England branch was delighted to host its first event in Bath at the University. This was a joint event with the Bath IET, which was well attended with both APM and IET members.

Following networking and a buffet, Peter Wakeling, the Treasurer for the SWWE branch, welcomed all of the delegates and introduced our speaker, Mark Kozak-Holland.

Mark is a well known speaker for the APM and has presented at many branch events. He is the author behind the "Lessons from History" series of books which explores the lessons for project management from the past to help us avoid repeating the same mistakes and to learn from time proven techniques.

On the night, Mark looked at the Titanic disaster, the 4 years leading up to the project and up to the final 4 days of operation. The decisions taken in the preceding 4 years sowed the seeds which ultimately doomed the ship.

The business case for the Titanic and its sister ships, Olympic and Gigantic was sound. The White Star Line wanted three new ships to out compete Cunard on the lucrative North Atlantic route. The competitive advantage was to be luxury and safety rather than speed to tap into the tourist market. ROI was anticipated in 2-3 years.



The ship was designed to be safe, with a double hull, Marconi radio system, electric watertight doors, multi-compartment bulkheads as well as a full complement of life boats. The myth grew amongst the design team that she was unsinkable. As the design progressed, aesthetic features started to drive design changes and compromise the safety features. The double skinning was reduced to maximise internal space, the first class dining salon

required removal and shortening of bulkheads, the life boats blocked the first class views from the boat deck, and were reduced in number, which was allowed by out of date regulations. Group thinking prevented hard questioning about the safety compromises.

Her identical sister ship, the Olympic was launched before the Titanic and had undergone full sea trials, but a serious collision badly damaged her and required repairs in the Harland-Wolff yard. This took resources from the Titanic build and delayed her completion. Commercial pressures on White Star drove Bruce Ismay to demand Titanic sail on her maiden voyage as scheduled. The ship was handed over on time, but with only 1 day of sea trials rather than 2 months. As she was identical to the Olympic, this was not considered an issue, but every ship is different and her crew were not trained or familiar with the new ship or its operating and safety systems. The maiden voyage, with passengers, was to be its sea trials.

On her maiden voyage, the ice fields were known about, but Bruce Ismay decided as a publicity stunt to race across the Atlantic to break Olympics' record and arrive a day early. Because of the lack of sea trails, the ships functional systems had not been tested. The lookouts did not have binoculars, the ice warnings were not passed on systematically by the Marconigram operators (as commercial passenger messages took priority), and an ice test was faked. The officers did not have the feedback systems in place to understand the safety issues with approaching ice at full speed.

When ice was spotted, despite the best efforts of the officers, the ship grounded on an ice shelf. Damage surveys were incomplete, and Bruce Ismay forced a decision to proceed off the ice in order to save face. This decision ripped the hull open and sealed the ships fate!

Decisions to compromise the design safety features to meet aesthetic needs, commercial pressures to sail early which resulted in a lack of testing, a crew unfamiliar with the ship and its systems, and allowing business pressures to override operational procedures were the key reasons for the disaster. These lessons are equally true of projects today and we should take note of them.

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