

Personal interests, the main cause of project failure?

A different look at the Berlin Brandenburg Airport project

Quite a lot has been written on the new Berlin Airport. Now it is time to look at it from a different angle. Let's look at the real causes of delay and not just the obvious ones. We have read about the obvious causes: like changing requirements, bad planning and bad project management. But what is behind all this?

One can understand the sentiments of the journalists who refer to Germany's great cultural heritage when reporting on the site of the new Berlin Brandenburg Airport. The new development is compared to a musical overture: "They form the overture for the development of this prime real estate location, which is set to flourish even before the new airport opens and will pick up speed once BER starts operating". They could be talking about a Wagnerian overture. Clearly things did last very long indeed.

But 21 years after the first initiative and an investment of approximately 4.3 billion (compared to a forecasted 1.7 billion), many Berlin citizens are now asking themselves when the Berlin Brandenburg Airport will open its doors? How is it that the Berlin Brandenburg Airport is still not operational?

Planning for a new Berlin airport started in 1992. In 1996 the regional authorities of Berlin and Brandenburg decided to locate the new airport next to the existing Schönefeld airport in Berlin-Schönefeld, The opening of the airport was originally planned for October 2011. This was postponed to June 3rd 2012, then March 2013 and most recently to October 2013. In the "Berliner Morgenpost" January 10, 2013 an expert even predicts that the airport will not be able to start its activities before the year 2017. In September 2012 The "Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin" initiated an investigation into the cost and delivery overrun of the project: "*Einsetzung eines Untersuchungsausschusses zur Aufklärung der Ursachen, Konsequenzen und Verantwortung für die Kosten- und Terminüberschreitungen des im Bau befindlichen Flughafens Berlin Brandenburg Willy Brandt (BER)*". The investigation would provide an answer to 78 questions divided over five areas of research: planning, communication and control, supplier selection and building phase, reasons for delivery delay and cost development. The result of the investigation has not yet been presented. The investigation focusses on the typical structural matters that will answer the question "**what** went wrong?", but they will not answer the question "**why** it went wrong?". To answer that we must have a look at who could have benefitted from the decisions made during the project!

The superficial causes are have been well- publicised in the media by various critics: changing requirements, bad planning and bad project management.

Let's now have a different look at the causes of delay than the obvious ones. Could it be that there are persons with deviating interests? We will stick to some questions that might not be asked as some stakeholders don't want to have them answered.

Why did contractors accept contracts for work which they knew upfront they were unable to deliver? This might be a human factor issue. In times of economic crisis you can't be too choosy; your business has to survive. Starting with unclear requirements offers you the opportunity to initiate change and extra income.

Why was the project steering committee run by politicians? It is well known that the decisions of politicians are driven by their political interests and pending elections. It is not in the politician's interest to communicate anything that will endanger his or her re-election.

Looking at the facts and the circumstances it might have been in the interest of several stakeholders to be optimistic about planning and cost. Certainly the politicians benefit, in the end people will remember them for the beautiful airport they realised. The overruns will soon be forgotten, for benefit of their career they will blame the builder, the architects and the planners.

Contractors are prepared to take the blame in return for the security of a large contract in difficult economic times. Their main interest is survival, taking a few political blows is not an issue.

We all know the general causes; any project with overrun will claim the requirements have changed. The interesting question is why we continue to be fascinated by these causes, when they are so predictable. Stating that the requirements have changed is too simple.

The truth is one layer deeper than the requirements cause on the surface: we have to look at what makes the machine tick? What are the drivers that put people in motion? Then you will discover that people very much wanted the airport to become a success. So far so good. But they will go to extremes to make it happen. They will deny and cover up expected budget overruns. An overrun might kill the project, and that is not what is intended. They will cover up the failed construction work and the lack of documentation on the wiring. It is not that the German engineers do not know how to execute the job, quite the contrary. Quoting a critic of the Tagespiegel: "Fashion is better in Italy, food is better in France and Germans do engineering. So not to be able to construct a single terminal building is super embarrassing." The reason is personal interest, a driver beyond engineering, but a powerful one. A driver that makes people act and decide, without following the plan, it makes them manipulate. Drivers can be as down to earth as money, but also more philosophical as satisfaction, wanting to take the credits of a huge success as opening a new airport.

Can this be prevented? At least it can be reduced considerably by understanding the drivers and analysing them before hand. When you know the real drivers, ways can be found to satisfy the drivers without destroying an entire project and loose millions.

Just leave the thought that people are all only driven by one overall integer attitude. There is more between heaven and earth!