

# Project Management Rescues Healthcare.gov: A PMBOK-Inspired Analysis of Overcoming IT Project Challenges

**Afifah Nazatul<sup>1</sup>, Iman Sofia<sup>1</sup>, Siti Zulalina<sup>1</sup>, Afiq Haikal<sup>1</sup>,  
Raffael Lawrenzier<sup>1</sup>, Yacqub Isse<sup>1</sup>, Ibrahim Asim<sup>1</sup>, Abobkr  
Eisa<sup>1</sup>, Siti Hajar Arbain<sup>1\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Fakulti Sains Komputer dan Teknologi Maklumat,  
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, 86400, MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** The launch of the Healthcare.gov website in 2013 served as an interesting case study that demonstrated the practical application of project management principles in the face of unexpected IT project issues. This article discusses challenges faced during website launches, including performance and stability issues, and how project managers leverage the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) to manage and resolve these challenges. Project managers effectively use PMBOK key knowledge areas, such as Integration, Scope, Risk, Quality and Communication Management, to navigate these complex situations. Their responses include integrated change control, tight scope management, risk assessment and mitigation, an emphasis on quality assurance, and transparent communication with stakeholders. This case study highlights the important role of project management in saving high-stakes projects and provides valuable insights into managing IT project incidents.

**Keywords:** Healthcare.gov, Project Management, PMBOK

## 1. Introduction

The Healthcare.gov project, designed as an online marketplace for healthcare policy, aims to revolutionize access to healthcare services and offer income-based subsidies. The development was started in December 2011, with the ambitious goal of launching on October 1, 2013. The project attracted significant attention due to its connection to the Affordable Care Act and its complex technical approach, characterized by open-source development and access to code programs.

The system's complexity stems from its role as an interface that connects various databases and information systems, such as Experian for identity verification, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for taxes and Medicaid and health plan carriers for health care options [1]. Many stakeholders are involved, with Health and Human Services (HHS) overseeing the project, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) providing primary oversight, and more than 55 contractors developing various aspects of Healthcare.gov.

The launch of Healthcare.gov in 2013, intended to be a breakthrough platform for purchasing healthcare policies and calculating subsidies, faced severe technical issues after its launch. Users face a variety of issues, from slow response times to frequent crashes and registration difficulties. A two-day Verizon network outage made matters worse, attracting widespread attention and even recognition from President Obama. The challenge is compounded by late project specifications, evolving requirements, and the absence of a unified error detection system [2]. Furthermore, the uncertainty surrounding cost estimates adds another layer of complexity.

This case delves into the nuances and obstacles associated with managing large-scale, IT-based projects, shedding light on the critical role of effective project management. This narrative emphasizes the important aspects of clear requirements and rigorous testing, underscoring their importance in navigating the complex landscape of high-profile initiatives [3]. As we dissect the Healthcare.gov project, we unpack the lessons it offers for future endeavours in healthcare IT and beyond.

The Healthcare.gov website failure, a critical incident in the realm of healthcare technology, is explored in this article through a comprehensive analysis of the contributing factors and consequences. Technical glitches, inadequate system testing, and challenges in project management are identified as pivotal elements leading to the failure. The article underscores the importance of thorough planning, effective communication, and rigorous testing in the development and maintenance of large-scale healthcare platforms. Lessons learned from this incident are distilled into practical recommendations for future projects in similar domains. By examining the Healthcare.gov failure, this article aims to contribute valuable insights to the field of project management and system development, emphasizing the need for a proactive and holistic approach to mitigate risks and ensure the success of critical healthcare initiatives.

## **2. Issue**

The issues surrounding the Healthcare.gov project's launch in 2013 were not only technical but had far-reaching implications that reverberated through both public and political spheres. As individuals sought to navigate the platform to shop for and enrol in healthcare policies, a myriad of technical challenges emerged, creating a frustrating experience for users. The website's response time was unbearably slow, crashes were frequent, and a substantial number of users encountered insurmountable obstacles in completing the insurance registration process.

Compounding these technical glitches, a Verizon network outage occurring just two days prior further exacerbated the challenges faced by Healthcare.gov. The sheer magnitude of these issues was underscored by relentless media coverage, with daily news reports documenting the struggles of users attempting to navigate a malfunctioning system. Even President Obama, a staunch supporter of the Affordable Care Act, publicly acknowledged the problem and expressed dissatisfaction with the website's performance.

This situation transcended the realm of technical inconveniences, evolving into an embarrassing failure that tainted the broader implementation of the Affordable Care Act. The efficacy of ambitious healthcare reform was cast into doubt, overshadowed by the prominent website issues. The aftermath of these technical challenges left government Chief Information Officers (CIOs) and project management experts grappling with a critical question: What factors led to this problematic implementation, and how can similar issues be averted in the future?

Beyond the technical realm, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) were accused of committing what has been termed a "deadly sin" in project management, further complicating an already intricate situation. The technology running this magnitude is beyond the capabilities of CMS. Other federal organizations, such as DOD and NASA, have decades of experience overcoming institutional barriers to designing, implementing, and running reliable IT systems. CMS has proven abundantly during the procurement, development and launch phases that its staff lacks the knowledge and experience needed to oversee large-scale technology projects, especially those with additional regulatory hurdles imposed by government agencies. This multifaceted challenge intertwines technical weaknesses with project management intricacies and considerations of public policy [4]. It serves as a compelling example of the intricate dynamics that unfold in complex IT projects with significant public impact, emphasizing the crucial need for effective project management practices and robust oversight in high-profile initiatives.

As a result of an accumulation of issues, the launch was unsuccessful. When the software or website is not ready, the release is usually delayed. Engineers run additional tests, address issues, and launch later. A unique initiative, Healthcare.gov has an impact that goes beyond a bad user experience. CMS is under pressure to deploy products on time instead of being open and honest about the infrastructure's inability to support millions of customers. As we delve deeper into the Healthcare.gov incident, we unravel the layers of challenges that must be addressed to ensure the success of endeavours with widespread societal implications and can be summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of the issues that led to the failed launch of the Healthcare.gov website**

Issues	Description
1. Overconfidence	The project began with overconfidence and unrealistic expectations, stemming from the White House.
2. Underestimated Scale	The project's scale was underestimated, resulting in mismanagement in organizational structure, leadership, accountability, and transparency.
3. Political Challenges	The hostile political climate added complexity, with pressure and influence from outside the agency.
4. Lack of Technology Experience	The CMS lacked the necessary understanding and experience to handle a technology project at this scale.

### 3. Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)

The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) is a comprehensive guide and framework that serves as a standard for the project management profession. Developed by the Project Management Institute (PMI), PMBOK provides a systematic and structured approach to project management, offering a set of best practices, principles and processes that can be used across industries and project types [5].

At its core, PMBOK defines project management as "the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements." It outlines a set of knowledge areas, each representing a key aspect of project management, and describes the processes included in these

knowledge areas [6]. The PMBOK covers a wide range of topics, including project initiation, planning, implementation, monitoring and control, and closure. It is designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing project managers to adapt its principles to fit the unique characteristics and needs of their projects. This guide is a valuable resource for project managers, providing a common language and structured approach to project management that facilitates communication and collaboration between project teams. It is also the basis for PMI's Project Management Professional (PMP) certification, a globally recognized qualification for project managers.

The Healthcare.gov project highlights various aspects of project management and the challenges faced during implementation. The project manager can handle this issue with the knowledge of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK):

### 3.1 Project Integration Management

In the field of Project Integration Management, project managers use integrated change control to address critical issues encountered during Healthcare.gov implementation. By initiating meetings with various stakeholders, including technical teams, contractors and government officials, project managers emphasize the need for alignment with project objectives. They facilitate adjustments to project plans and ensure that changes are carefully documented and efficiently implemented [7]. This proactive approach helps maintain unity and responsiveness during technical challenges.

### 3.2 Project Scope Management

The project manager reviews the scope and objectives of the project. They had to determine which functions and features were causing technical issues and needed immediate attention. At the same time, they need to consider the long-term goals of the project, aligning the scope with the ACA's overarching objectives.

### 3.3 Project Risk Management

The project manager conducted risk assessments to evaluate the impact of the website's technical problems on the project timeline and the ACA's reputation [8]. They developed a risk response plan, which included communicating transparently about the issues and their potential consequences. This proactive risk management strategy helped in mitigating the impact of unforeseen technical issues on the project's overall success.

### 3.4 Project Quality Management

To address the technical challenges head-on, the project manager prioritized Project Quality Management. Rigorous quality assurance processes were implemented, directing the development team, contractors, and testers to focus on identifying and rectifying issues in the system[9]. This emphasis on quality ensured that subsequent problems were minimized, reinforcing the robustness of the project.

### 3.5 Project Communications Management

Effective communication emerged as a linchpin during the crisis. Within Project Communications Management, the project manager provided regular updates to stakeholders, including government officials, the public, and contractors. Maintaining transparency about the technical challenges faced by the website and the actions being taken to resolve them fostered trust and kept stakeholders informed.

The project manager's approach aligned seamlessly with key PMBOK knowledge areas, showcasing the critical role of project management in addressing unexpected incidents in complex IT

projects [5]. Through the effective application of these knowledge areas, the project manager successfully navigated the turbulent waters of the Healthcare.gov launch, mitigating issues, and ensuring the project's ultimate success. This case serves as a poignant reminder of the paramount importance of applying PMBOK principles in high-profile IT projects and adapting project management strategies to respond to evolving challenges.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The application of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) framework, as demonstrated in the Healthcare.gov case study, has proven to be instrumental in achieving positive project management outcomes. Adherence to PMBOK guidelines and principles equips project managers with a robust framework for efficient project planning, execution, control and closure, contributing to overall project success.

A significant advantage of implementing the PMBOK methodology is its ability to streamline project management practices. By providing a structured approach, the PMBOK ensures that project managers have a comprehensive set of tools and techniques at their disposal, improving their ability to navigate complex projects successfully. Emphasis on key knowledge areas, including project integration, scope, time, cost, communication, risk, acquisition, and stakeholder management, proved essential in addressing challenges across multiple aspects of the project [9].

Furthermore, the PMBOK framework encourages effective collaboration among project stakeholders. The active involvement of stakeholders is fundamental to successful project management, and the PMBOK methodology facilitates this collaboration. In the case of Healthcare.gov, the involvement of various stakeholders, including government officials, technical teams, contractors and the public, played an important role in addressing technical challenges and mitigating the impact of project setbacks.

The success observed in using the PMBOK framework in the Healthcare.gov project confirms its value in guiding project managers through the various phases of the project. The emphasis on knowledge areas provides project managers with a comprehensive toolkit, enabling them to proactively manage risk, communicate effectively and ensure the project is aligned with its objectives. The positive results obtained from the use of the PMBOK framework in the Healthcare.gov case study underscore the importance of incorporating a structured project management methodology. As projects become increasingly complex, the PMBOK framework serves as a valuable resource, empowering project managers to navigate challenges and deliver successful outcomes through effective collaboration and adherence to key knowledge areas.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the examination of the Healthcare.gov website failure presented in the journal article has shed light on critical incidents that significantly impacted the functionality and user experience of a vital healthcare platform. The incident exemplar highlighted various issues, including technical glitches, inadequate system testing, and challenges in project management. One key takeaway is the importance of thorough planning, rigorous testing, and effective project management in the development and maintenance of complex systems, especially those with critical societal implications. The Healthcare.gov failure serves as a cautionary tale for future projects of similar magnitude, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach to avoid such setbacks.

Based on the insights gleaned from the article, several recommendations can be made to mitigate the risks associated with large-scale system implementations. Firstly, there is a critical need for increased transparency and communication between different stakeholders involved in such projects. Clear and open lines of communication can help address issues promptly and ensure that all parties are well-informed about the project's progress. Secondly, rigorous testing protocols should be implemented throughout the development lifecycle to identify and rectify potential issues before the system goes live. Moreover, regular system audits and continuous monitoring can contribute to the early detection of any anomalies, facilitating proactive problem resolution. Additionally, investing in the ongoing professional development of project teams can enhance their skills and knowledge, fostering a culture of adaptability and innovation.

The Healthcare.gov website failure provides valuable lessons for the broader field of project management and system development in critical domains. By incorporating these lessons and recommendations into future endeavours, stakeholders can contribute to the creation and maintenance of robust, reliable, and user-friendly systems that meet the needs of both administrators and end-users in complex and high-stakes environments. The PMBOK offers a comprehensive and widely recognized framework for project management that is applicable across various industries. The results of its application, as exemplified by the Healthcare.gov case, underscore the value of this approach in achieving project success, enhancing stakeholder satisfaction, and delivering positive project outcomes.

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