Involve Users or Fail: Lessons from an East African IT Project

This case study examines the failed implementation of a $5.35 million Management Information System (MIS) in a bank in East Africa. The project aimed to consolidate and automate banking processes, but it was abandoned after one year. The central thesis of this analysis is that inadequate user involvement critically undermined the success of the project, highlighting the indispensable role users play in IT system development.

Despite its ambitious goals, the project was hindered by poor planning, escalating costs, and most importantly, a lack of meaningful user involvement. Evidence from surveys and interviews shows users were excluded from key stages such as requirement gathering, design, and progress updates. Many were unaware of system developments, and their feedback was not solicited, leading to misaligned expectations and an eventual disconnect between the system and its intended functions.

The cause-and-effect relationship is clear: users who are not involved early and continuously cannot provide accurate requirements or adapt to new systems, which results in resistance, inefficiencies, and ultimately failure. Respondents and interviewees overwhelmingly cited lack of user consultation as the main reason for project failure, even more than technical or budgetary issues.

Key findings show that user involvement improves system relevance, usability, and acceptance. The banks failure illustrates how even technically sound infrastructure cannot compensate for a lack of human-centered design.

To manage the project more effectively, the following steps should have been taken:
1. Involve users in all development stagesfrom planning to implementation.
2. Conduct regular requirement-gathering sessions with cross-departmental users.
3. Maintain open communication with users throughout the project.
4. Provide training and feedback loops to ensure alignment and user buy-in.
5. Ensure senior management reinforces user involvement as a priority.

In sum, IT projects succeed not solely on technical grounds but through active, consistent engagement with the users they intend to serve.