

# Chapter 21

## Application of Sustainability Considerations in Practice: The Open Remote Case

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### ABSTRACT

*Many articles have called attention to the concept of sustainability in project management. However, it still remains a challenge to tie all these very important principles to practice. In this chapter, the main issues with the practical application of sustainability to an actual project are identified, and a method for analysis is presented. Through this method, the authors answer the main question of this chapter: “How can a project and its project management be analyzed for sustainability and how can adequate actions be selected?” The proposed method is then applied to an actual case. In the analysis, an explicit distinction is made between the internal project view of sustainability and external view of sustainability. From the analysis, various conclusions can be drawn.*

### INTRODUCTION

Many articles have been provided to call attention to the concept of sustainability in project management. Some of them discuss the basic concepts that are involved; concepts like the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997) and the six guiding principles to

sustainability (Silvius, Van den Brink, & Köhler, 2010). Even with these concepts and theories in place it remains a challenge to tie all these very important principles to practice.

For this purpose, we have selected a single case study that we will use to bring some practicality into the largely theoretical field of sustainabil-

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ity in project management. This case study will serve as an example of a project to be analyzed on sustainability. It will offer insights into how numerous sustainability theories are applicable to a project. By doing this, some general major pitfalls when it comes to sustainability in project management will come to light. With this we will also try to identify sustainability opportunities that are specific to the case study.

The case study focused on a project by the Beijing division of Finalist IT Group and was previously featured in an article by Silvius and Nedeski (2011), where the focus was more descriptive and on the connection to Green IS. The data collection for the case study took place in 2010 through semi-structured interviews with the general manager and the project manager of the project in question. Besides this the project manager filled in a maturity assessment questionnaire developed by Silvius and Schipper (2010). This maturity assessment measured the presence (and the lack) of sustainability in the project's project management process and end product. It measured both the actual situation and the desired situation. Finalist IT Group, the organization in question, is a Dutch IT service provider with several branches, amongst which their Beijing branch as visited in 2010. The Beijing office employed around 30 people.

The project in question, named 'OpenRemote', was an open source software development project where Finalist Beijing, with a core development team of 10 people, designed and implemented a software application for iPhone, iPad and other Mac-products. The project was destined for the US with a budget of over 1 million dollars. The goal of the project was to design and program an open source software application for controlling the lighting, air conditioning, entertainment equipment, and other electrical devices in the average home that normally require many separate remotes (and batteries). So in this case the product (remote control and batteries) is redesigned into a service (the software application).

Although this already suggests an inherent level of sustainability in the project's end-product, it should be kept in mind that creating a seemingly sustainable product could often have been significantly more sustainable. This due to the perception of inherent sustainability which leads to the overlooking of certain aspects that could have (less obviously) improved sustainability. Because this project is about replacing a product with a service, it already seems sustainable. But there are a lot more matters to take into account when it comes to creating a truly sustainable product. The design phase of a project can, for example, be utilized to create a sustainable end product. This is an advantage that should be used even when the end product already seems inherently sustainable. Thinking about the market, the use of the product, and so on, can also contribute to a more sustainable product. Because something is 'green' doesn't mean that it is completely sustainable. This is a mistake easily made.

This particular project is, for a case study on sustainability in project management, very interesting. As briefly mentioned, although it can be argued that this project (or at least the product) is inherently sustainable, this statement is actually slightly short-sighted. Simply observing that the end product of a project has a sustainable aspect or a sustainable impact hardly makes it (or the development process or the project management process!) sustainable. At the very least it lacks a full analysis of sustainability during the project. This can be clarified by looking at, for example, the product's entire life cycle, together with the project management life cycle. It has increasingly been argued that for a project and the product of that project to be truly sustainable, the entire process (from brainstorm to disposal) has to be taken into account (Labuschagne and Brent, 2007; Silvius et al., 2012).

When developing the 'OpenRemote' project, no thought was given to any aspect other than getting the project done. Project management in general, and this project is no exception, is often

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