



CASE STUDY

IHG

InterContinental Hotels Group

CASE STUDY:

Improving Risk Management and Success Rates of Complex Project

How IHG bridged the divide between project rigor and creativity, implementing a project management approach that works for everyone.



OBJECTIVE:

To minimize project risk and deliver complex projects on time and within budget.

When your business is hospitality, guest comfort and satisfaction are critical measurements of success. It's no surprise then that InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), one of the world's leading hotel companies, has a stated goal of creating Great Hotels Guests Love.

IHG operates 9 hotel brands encompassing more than 722,000 rooms in over 4,900 hotels in nearly 100 countries and territories around the world. The company behind such iconic hotel brands as InterContinental® Hotels and Resorts, Crowne Plaza® Hotels and Resorts, Hotel Indigo®, Holiday Inn®, Holiday Inn® Express®, Staybridge Suites® and Candlewood Suites® has built a strong service culture that values interpersonal connections, collaboration and creativity. It's a culture that is paying off not just in awards and recognition from the industry but in the positive word-of-mouth and service rankings from its loyal guests.

However, the company realized the kind of people-focused, "big picture" thinking that has made it so successful in achieving and maintaining "guest love" was in many ways at odds with the rigorous, disciplined thinking required to manage the increasingly complex projects involved with a growing portfolio of 772 managed and more than 4,000 franchised hotels around the world.

To make their projects as successful as their guest satisfaction efforts, they would have to bridge the divide between analytical, step-by-step project management approaches and the interpersonal, collaborative culture they had worked so hard to create and maintain.



CHALLENGES:

To improve collaboration between project managers and team members/stakeholders and develop a project management approach more aligned with the corporate culture.

“The project managers were trying to succeed in a creative environment, and they didn’t have the tools to do it.” – Crystal Snoddy, Head of Delivery Excellence, IHG

IHG had a team of experienced project managers in place, but they were struggling to deliver projects in the IHG environment. The work was complex, but even more problematic was the clash of thinking that was making it difficult to carry projects through to completion.

Project management typically relies on rigorous, incremental thinking, with processes and tools designed to match, but at IHG the project managers were dealing with a service-oriented culture filled with people who preferred to get things done through collaboration, relationship building and freeform communication.

“The project managers had the traditional project management tools and skills, but they struggled with the constant changes, building relationships and communicating with the so-called ‘right brainers’ at IHG,” says Crystal Snoddy, IHG’s Head of Delivery Excellence. “They were trying to succeed in a creative environment, and they didn’t have the tools to do it.”

Snoddy realized the problem was rooted in a difference in thinking preferences.

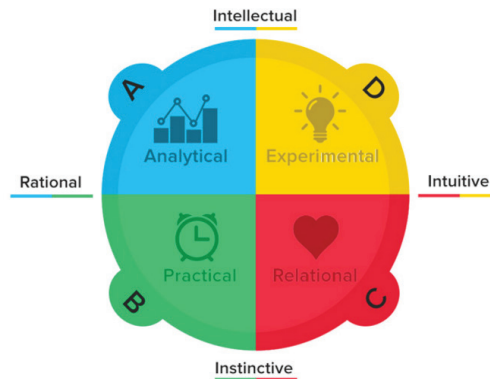


SOLUTION:

Using a thinking-based approach as the framework for improving communication and for bringing creative thinking and design sensibility to the rigor of project management.

“Other models are more focused on behavior, so it’s harder to have a conversation about problem solving. Whole Brain® Thinking is more applicable in the workplace because it’s about the way you think and solve problems. It facilitates a good work discussion.”

– Crystal Snoddy, Head of Delivery Excellence, IHG



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Figure 1: The Herrmann Whole Brain Model

Snoddy and the company had been introduced to Whole Brain® Thinking and the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®) the year before as they were setting up a new Hotel Openings Team. During that process, each team member completed the HBDI® assessment to learn about how they preferred to think and how thinking preferences affect relationship building, communications and other behaviors—and ultimately the results achieved.

These consultants needed to be able to authentically connect with their clients—the hotel owners—to facilitate the opening process, so they learned how to “put themselves in the investor’s mindset” and communicate in a Whole Brain® way.

“The point is we don’t know our clients’ thinking preferences but we know ours, and we wanted to be sure to communicate in way that makes them love us and return to us when they’re ready to build a new hotel,” explains Snoddy.

While they had looked at other assessment models and approaches, they chose the Whole Brain® approach because of its applicability to business.

“Other models are more focused on behavior,” Snoddy says. “So it’s harder to have a conversation about problem solving. Whole Brain® Thinking is more applicable in the workplace because it’s about the way you think and solve problems. It facilitates a good work discussion.”

It was a natural next step to apply the methodology to the Hotel Opening Team’s project management processes. Combined with work the company was doing to incorporate more visual communications into the materials they were creating for non-native-English-speaking hotel owners, they knew they could build the framework for a Whole Brain® process, one that brought creative thinking and design sensibility to the rigor of project management.

Developing and Implementing “The IHG Way” of Project Delivery

When mapped against the Whole Brain® Model, the thinking preferences of the project managers, as well as of traditional project management tools, were strongly tilted toward A- (analytical, rigorous) and B- (disciplined, organized) quadrant thinking. The IHG culture and the majority of its employees, on the other hand, had strong C- (interpersonal, expressive) and D- (imaginative, experimental) quadrant preferences. The goal was to embed Whole Brain® Thinking into project management and delivery to make the process more productive for everyone involved.



There were several key elements the Hotel Opening Team focused on:

- Learning about one’s own thinking preferences and the impact of thinking on work approaches
- Understanding the role different thinking preferences play on results and the importance of including all perspectives
- Solving problems more efficiently and completely by taking all thinking preferences into consideration
- Communicating project updates in a way that appeals to all thinking preferences
- Creating Whole Brain® project management tools and templates

“Ultimately, when you’re managing projects and communicating updates, you want to include all thinking preferences and balance your style,” Josie Oliver, IHG’s Project Delivery Methodology and Training Manager, says. “You don’t have the luxury of knowing everyone’s thinking preferences, so you need to focus on Whole Brain® approach.”

Whole Brain® Thinking quickly became a way of working for the team, and it was having a profound impact on results. Others in the organization quickly took notice.

“Everyone started to notice how successful their projects were, so the team gradually evolved from only working on hotel openings projects to taking on more global and technology-related projects,” Oliver says. “And they would build Whole Brain® teams to handle them.”

When people began to ask why their onboarding programs was so effective, they would explain: “It’s because we took a Whole Brain® approach.”

Their successes led to the decision to create a toolkit and formalized training that would provide the foundation and tools to think about project management and delivery at IHG in a more whole-brained way.

The project delivery approach was created with a basis in traditional project management/problem solving methods such as PMBOK, Prince 2, Lean Six Sigma and others, which are rooted in A- and B-quadrant thinking. IHG then worked with a visual design company to create methods and tools that support visual thinking techniques, facilitation, change management and the C and D quadrants—altogether creating a Whole Brain® approach to delivering projects.

The IHG Way Toolkit for Project Delivery

“Receiving the toolkit was great. It means that you have something tangible to help you through the discovery phase especially, and I think it will encourage people more to actually use the tools and the templates.” – Participant Feedback

The first thing someone notices when they open the IHG Way Toolkit is that it looks nothing like conventional project management processes. Its striking design, method cards, discovery cards and color-coded materials filled with infographic-style visuals communicate the same information but in a dramatically different way. Beyond the immediate visual difference, the tools themselves are different, too.

“Most project management tools and training are just generic templates,” Oliver says. “But this includes a whole range of tools designed to appeal to the full spectrum of thinkers. No matter what the project manager’s thinking preference is, there is something they’ll be able to use.”

The 45 method cards, for example, are a mixture of visual and tactical approaches when you need to:

- Align a group of people
- Facilitate a meeting, workshop or training event
- Envision the future
- Plan for a project, meeting or approach
- Explore new thoughts and ideas
- Communicate messages, plans and projects

The “Pain!Gain” card, used when developing presentations, value propositions or other interactions designed to influence a decision, helps in targeting discussions on the issues that matter. It incorporates visuals, brainstorming and colorful interactive elements to engage participants in the process. Similarly, the “Big Head Persona” card is a fun way to “get inside the head” of one’s audience to define what they think about and pay attention to in order to understand how to best solve their problems. “Sticky steps” give people a collaborative way to create the information and steps that go into each project timeline.

In all, Oliver says, the toolkit makes it more comfortable for those with C- and D-quadrant thinking preferences because it gives them a creative way to get at the information. “You’re not just giving them a template. You’re giving them a collaborative way to get there, which is much less painful for them.”

Training in the IHG Way

“This was without a doubt the best project course I have been on...The Whole Brain® Thinking session really had people interacting and thinking about team and individual profiles. It’s something I will take with me wherever I go.”

–Drew Davey, Interim Director Programme Management, Global Brand Services

IHG’s “expert project managers” complete a three-day training program that is framed by Whole Brain® Thinking concepts. It kicks off with a debriefing of the HBDI® profile results and discussion of the need to understand one’s own thinking preferences to be effective in the role.

The program also explores how successful project management is a Whole Brain® process. Participants are put into teams with a balance of thinking preferences represented and work through a case study so they can experience firsthand the Whole Brain® team effect.



Part of the experience, Oliver says, is pushing the participants outside their comfort zones. “The first thing they do in class is draw something. There’s also an ‘Iron Chef’ competition and an improv workshop. I them, ‘You’re going to be uncomfortable. Just go with it!’”

Finally, the participants spend time learning how to use the toolkit and how it supports Whole Brain® Thinking in project management and delivery.

In addition to the expert Project Managers, there are many people in the company who are responsible for managing projects, even though they may not have “project manager” in their title. This group goes through a shortened version of the training and receives a condensed toolkit.

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RESULTS:

Increased project visibility, a noted improvement in risk management, improved collaboration and a shift in culture.

"Now that we've introduced the IHG Way with Whole Brain® Thinking as the core foundation, as a company we're able to have more strategic decisions on prioritizing projects."

– Josie Oliver, Project Delivery Methodology and Training Manager, IHG

The process has allowed the company to articulate a clear IHG Way of Managing Projects, which includes a community of project managers, a project management approach and project delivery standards all grounded in Whole Brain® Thinking.

According to Snoddy and Oliver, it has yielded clear results, including:

- More visibility for their projects
- Increased ability to manage project risks—an improvement that has been specifically noted by the executive sponsors
- More effective collaboration, which means they're able to deliver on more complex initiatives
- A shift in culture, with the language and processes now part of the culture

Of the HBDI® profile debriefs and discussions, Leanne Henderson, PMO–BSI team, Director, Global Brand Standards, says, "These were the most accurate analyses of our personalities and preferences that I have seen to date at IHG...We enjoyed overlaying our profiles to see why we work as a team and where we had room to grow—we need to head more 'into the red' when we are under pressure! I hope this is used more through the business as it was a real winner for us."

For a hotel organization that encompasses more than 720,000 hotel rooms across nearly 100 countries, there are complex projects in all areas of the business benefitting from the approach. Not only is Whole Brain® Thinking helping the teams improve project success rates, it's also helping the company make smarter decisions about project prioritization.

“Overall, now that we’ve introduced the IHG Way with Whole Brain® Thinking as the core foundation, as a company we’re able to have more strategic decisions on prioritizing projects,” says Oliver.

Initially, there does tend to be pushback about the length of the training, she says, but the feedback afterwards is usually “we wish we would have had more time.”

“The activities with the project mapping cards can be used not just in Project Delivery but in all things I do on a regular basis.” – Participant Feedback

“[Now I] understand how to structure a project and various tools we could apply to stimulate and organize thoughts.” – Participant Feedback

While the participants are forced to step outside their comfort zones, Oliver finds they are quickly adapting and applying the concepts because they see how much more productive and successful they can be once they do. “Someone said to me today, ‘Before coming to this team I was never a visual thinker, and now I draw everything!’”

She also points out that the HBDI® profile results have become a way of introducing people. The profiles are hanging outside cubicles so people know how to communicate more effectively with each other based on their thinking preferences.

“It’s interesting to note how the Whole Brain® concept just naturally fits into our culture and our Winning Ways—the set of behaviors based on our values that are designed to help everyone support our culture and make us one of the best companies in the world,” Oliver Josie. “It gives people a vehicle to work together and deliver on the Winning Ways.”

Next Steps and Lessons Learned

“This was probably the best IHG training I’ve ever taken.”

– Cleveland McKinney, Director, Priority Club Rewards and Channel Integration

Next, the company will focus on implementing a regional train-the-trainer process to complete the training for the global population who have project management responsibilities but aren’t “expert” project managers. Additional application-specific Whole Brain® Thinking training will be added in specific areas, including communication-focused training for regional project managers.

According to Cleveland McKinney, Director, Priority Club Rewards and Channel Integration, “This will be a mandatory PDP for the AMER Channel Integration and Business Development teams and will become a way of interaction for us in AMER DRM.”

And his message to his team is emphatic: “This was probably the best IHG training I’ve ever taken; moreover, this is the way we commence speaking to the business as it relates to all projects. Please ensure that it is on your PDP and take one of the courses before year end. Let’s be early adopters!”

With strong word-of-mouth spreading, Oliver says her biggest challenge is keeping up with the demand. “Now people see the benefits and want to offer it to their teams, too. I didn’t realize the collateral demand that would come up!”

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