



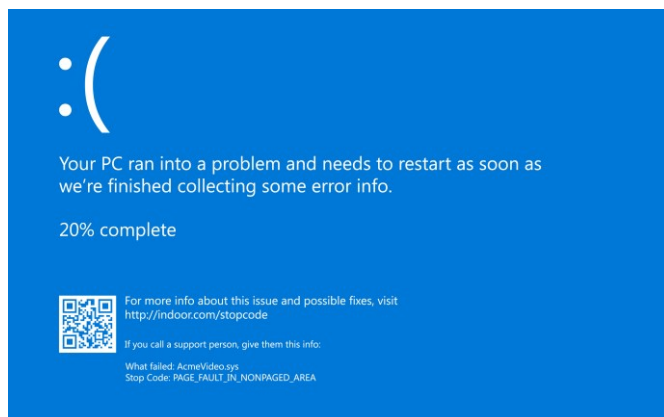
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Total systems failure: Three lessons on how to avoid a “blue screen of death” in your market systems development project

The “blue screen of death” invokes mild anxiety in just about any computer user. If it pops up on your screen, at a best case, you may have lost the last two hours of an unsaved spreadsheet. At its worst, your computer may have just been pushed into early retirement.



So why do we see these blue screens? They are usually the first indication of a larger failure within the computer system itself. It can be bad hardware, incompatible software, or the presence of invasive malware, just to name a few.

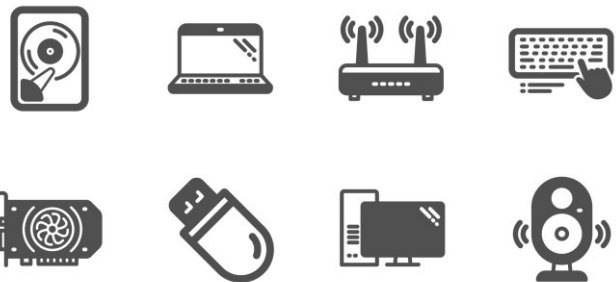
And just as your trusty laptop can fail you for a number of reasons, so can a relatively trusty development organisation trying to run a market systems development (MSD) project.

At the ILO, we are no exception to being prone to project blue screens. And while I struggle to diagnose issues with my own computer, I am better equipped to understand the challenges with our portfolio of MSD projects following post-mortems of a few (less) successful ones. Through the analogy of various computer failures, we have identified three problematic areas in our MSD projects along with some potential remedies that we hope can help us (as well

as other UN agencies and project implementers) start and launch new MSD projects smoothly.

1. Bring in good quality hardware: Staffing your team

Functioning hardware components are vital to your computer’s usability. You will struggle to be effective if your mouse, keyboard, monitor, hard drive or motherboard are damaged or do not work.



Similar to how a computer’s performance depends on the quality of its hardware, an MSD project cannot succeed without good quality staff. In fact, we have found quality human resourcing as the strongest indicator of a project’s success.

This may not be a shock to you, and we are certainly not the only ones to recognise this. The BEAM Exchange has invested time and resources into developing an [MSD competency framework](#) that sets out the competencies a project should strive to stock its team with and how to ensure that they get them. UNIDO also recently wrote about [key lessons in finding a team lead](#).

One issue in the ILO is that the recruitment process is often driven by technical specialists instead of human resource

specialists. This can be limiting as it takes some skill to navigate the ILO recruitment bureaucracy, which in turn, both limits the candidate pool and how quickly the project can get running with a team. For example, one staff position was recently filled 12 months after it was advertised and by the time the project got to the interview stage, half of the shortlisted candidates had dropped out because they found jobs elsewhere.

To help us become more efficient and effective in finding good staff, we have developed a “recruitment playbook”. This playbook lays out the recruitment procedures from start to finish and identifies tips to effectively navigate our internal recruitment bureaucracy, develop quality descriptions and find (or headhunt) qualified people to apply for these positions to “beef up” the depth of our candidate pool.

Linking to having a stronger candidate pool, we have enhanced our ability to draw on internal talent to fill out our project teams. This has been improved considerably by building up internal MSD capability – in both headquarters and in the field – as well as identifying existing staff with solid experience and competencies that translate well to MSD projects. This helps maintain and build up the internal talent pool and incentivises resource investment into further developing internal MSD talent.

2. Never boot-up in safe mode: Moving from analysis to action

After a computer crash, you may be asked to boot up in *safe mode* such that you can help diagnose the problem. Once in safe mode, your computer operates with reduced functionality, you may spend some time diagnosing and dealing with the failure, and then you might still need to fully reset your computer in the hope that it boots up without a problem.

While safe mode should be run in exceptional circumstances, it tended to be the default option in some of our earlier MSD projects. This happened because project teams generally started with a strong aversion to risk and even when things got moving, got stuck in the perpetual UN bureaucracy. Most had handy market systems analyses to help jumpstart action, however, projects [hardly used them](#). This all led projects down a road of start-up, work with limited functionality, diagnose and analyse what is wrong, restart, and hope for the best. Sound familiar?

Slow starts are common to many projects, not just those in MSD or in the ILO. We must recognise that teams need

some time to find their feet and often get stuck in the first two stages of the [form-storm-norm-perform](#) team development progression.

However, we have found some recurring issues specific to MSD projects. While we are trying to improve staff recruitment, our MSD projects have historically not been stocked with a highly experienced cast – from top to bottom – with market systems or market systems-friendly backgrounds. Staff unfamiliarity and natural risk aversion combined with the approach’s uncertainty all help apply the brakes on the start of a project.

While this has caused some start-up delays, as it does for many MSD projects, we are trying to remedy this by helping staff become comfortable with the approach and its uncertainty. As opposed to organising a one-off introductory MSD team training, where only a fraction of the content is retained and even less applied, we are now actioning a comprehensive MSD staff onboarding plan to help build-up capacity and comfort with the approach over time. This includes offering projects:

- A short initial broad training to enhance basic familiarity with the approach;
- Providing on the ground technical support at initial intervention design and partnership development stages (where possible); and
- Coaching management level staff on the approach’s nuances and situational challenges.

We are also taking lessons from our recent review on the effectiveness of our market systems analyses to help build momentum at the start of projects. We are currently exploring how to engage key stakeholders and the project team more in the analytical process, as well as experimenting with lighter touch, action-research as a starting point to get things moving. As we continue to learn through experimentation, we will have more to report on in the coming months.

3. Keep to one principal operating system: Pairing MSD with traditional methods

Running multiple operating systems, although certainly possible, is not necessarily advisable. Toggling between operating systems can increase the loss time while booting up your computer, your preferential shortcut commands can get all mixed up, and you may be more prone to hardware malfunctions (and a blue screen!). Over time, you will likely default to using the operating system you are

most comfortable with, so what is the point of having two operating systems anyway?



At the ILO, we can have projects with multiple components – i.e. MSD combined with more traditional, direct approaches (for example, direct trainings in entrepreneurship skills or generic stakeholder capacity building). In theory, the ILO should leverage this set-up and its expertise throughout the employment spectrum to complement the MSD work with some impactful direct interventions, particularly at the policy level.

However, as MSD is mostly familiar within the smaller, enterprise development-friendly parts of the ILO, the majority of the organisation has little understanding of the approach. This means that MSD is a comparatively newer, less familiar and more complicated operating system and that projects tend to prioritise what is comfortable and easy (contracting direct trainings) rather than doing what is unfamiliar and hard (building trust and partnerships through market facilitation). This is not helped by the fact that amid project chaos and regular, unforeseen project firefighting, the prospect of achieving bite-sized milestones can be more attractive than spending time to work towards longer-term, uncertain partnerships. This leads projects to using just one comfortable (direct) operating system and shelving the other (market systems). We are trying to resolve this by:

- Pushing for projects to be designed such that more than 50% of the project’s work falls under an MSD “bucket”. This helps justify staffing a team lead with MSD experience who will naturally push the team to think outside its comfort zone.
- Staffing the more direct component with one particular team member. For example, in a [multi-component project in Sierra Leone](#), the team leader has MSD experience and is supported by a staff member who oversees the direct employment-intensive infrastructure work (i.e. building roads that

provide access to rural areas and provide short-term workforce development). This helps reduce portfolio/intervention level staff from oscillating between two operating systems which can add confusion.

- Working with the staff from non-MSD components to support them to better understand MSD and how their work could be more systemic, or at least complementary.

Summarising how to avoid total systems failure

Failure is probably more common than we’d all like to admit in the market systems development community. While it is not widely reported on or discussed, understanding and being open about why we fail is an important step in enhancing the effectiveness of MSD projects – particularly as the community continues to grow. From our own experience, reflecting on these failures has led to changes in the way we work, which has already led to considerable improvements in the start-up of our newest round of MSD projects. We hope that these lessons can help you too. So, at the start of your next MSD project, help reduce the risk of your project becoming one big blue screen by:

- Stocking up with good, complementary hardware that is your project staff
- Avoiding booting up in safe mode i.e., train, support and encourage staff to take risks
- Using MSD as your principal project operating system

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