

The Puerto Rico Education Project System Development In An Island Paradise

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Tom Ballard gazed out at the beautiful San Juan skyline for several minutes, letting his thoughts roam through the memories of pleasant dinners under the stars and weekends snorkeling in crystal clear waters. Then he forced himself to close the blinds so he could focus his attention on the critical situation he faced. The project that had begun just a year ago with such promise had become a near-disaster. His most important task was to reorganize the project and get it back on track, but an even more immediate problem was the dinner meeting he had called for 8 p.m., about an hour from now. Almost all of the project employees and their spouses would be there; in fact, the only ones not attending were the just-deposed project manager, Gary Johnson, and his wife, Teresa, who were on a plane heading for Washington, D.C. Most of those attending the dinner would be angry with Tom, with Gary, and with the company. Ballard had one hour to decide how to respond to their anger.

The Genesis of the Puerto Rico Education Project (PREP)

Puerto Rico has a population of four million on an island of only 3,400 square miles. It is a U.S. possession, and its citizens have full U.S. citizenship, but the people have chosen to continue as a commonwealth rather than as a state of the Union. This means that they receive protection and government aid, but they are not required to pay Federal income taxes, and they have considerably more governmental freedom than they would have as a state. The former governor, Luis Muñoz Marin, once commented, "In my heart I want independence; in my head I want statehood, but in my stomach, I want commonwealth!" Puerto Rico is more densely populated than any state of the U.S., and the proportion of people below the poverty level is much greater than on the U.S. mainland.

Bruce Rollier prepared this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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The Puerto Rico Education Project (PREP) resulted from a contract negotiated by a division of a large U.S. company (hereafter called USCO) with the Puerto Rico Department of Education. The contract, funded by the U.S. government, specified the installation of a large mainframe computer and associated hardware, the design and implementation of a system to assist the Department in evaluating the results of education programs funded by the Federal government, and development of a large database containing data about all the students, teachers, and schools throughout the island. The cost of the hardware was about \$5 million. It was expected that system design and development would require another \$10 million, consisting primarily of personnel costs, and would take three years to complete.

All of the system design and software development work was to be conducted in Puerto Rico so that there could be frequent and continuing contact with Puerto Rico Department of Education officials as well as with principals and teachers in the school system. This would require a staff of capable systems analysts, computer programmers, administrators, and managers to be located in Puerto Rico for most of the contract period. USCO management assumed that the requisite skills for the professional and managerial positions would not be available in Puerto Rico; thus the entire project staff, with the exception of a few low-level clerical and secretarial positions, would have to be recruited from the U.S. mainland. Initial plans called for a small group of senior systems analysts with good planning skills to perform the requirements analysis and high-level design tasks. After about six months the programmers who would perform the detail design, coding, and testing would join them. At its peak the project staff would consist of about 25 people, of whom twenty would be relocated from the U.S. and the other five would be local hires.

As the contractor, USCO agreed to perform the following:

- Design and implementation of methods and procedures for the collection and storage of educational base-line data.
- Design and implementation of data handling procedures.
- Design and development of mathematical models and techniques to permit the continual assessment and evaluation of educational programs.
- Design and implementation procedures for the maintenance and updating of data in the base-line framework.
- Training of Puerto Rican personnel in effective use of the system.

The negotiations prior to signing of the contract were conducted at a high level. Most of the details were worked out between the contractor and the U.S. Office of Education, with little involvement by Puerto Rican officials. The Puerto Rico Secretary of Education approved the contract, but had no subsequent involvement. The wording of the contract strongly implied that the resulting system would benefit the school system and the pupils of Puerto Rico, but the nature of these benefits was not specifically stated. The proposal document, prepared by the contractor and incorporated into the final contract, was originally considered to contain sufficient detail to indicate the work that would be performed. Subsequently, however, a number of problems surfaced which stemmed from differences of opinion as to what the proposal said.

Project Staffing and Other Initial Decisions

USCO had many years of experience with complex projects, most of them successful. Although this project was above average in size and scope, many of the previous projects had been larger. They specialized in projects for the military, and many of the largest and most challenging assignments were carried out in the Washington, D.C. area, but projects had also been successfully implemented at remote sites in various parts of the U.S. and in many countries around the world. Client perceptions of the success of prior projects performed by the company was one of the most important factors in obtaining new business, so client satisfaction was a primary objective, and quality control was closely monitored. When a project required that personnel be moved to another country, there were well-established policies governing compensation, taxation, housing, education of dependents, career tracking, and many other factors. Intensive language training and cultural orientation was provided prior to departure, not only for the employee but also for the spouse and accompanying children. For off-site projects that involved a move to a different part of the U.S., on the other hand, most of these special policies did not apply.

It was clear to USCO executives that the Puerto Rico project should be classified as a domestic assignment. Puerto Rico was not a foreign country; it was part of the U.S., so the international policies did not cover PREP. This was to be administered as a domestic off-site project, the same as if it were in Oklahoma or Illinois. Moving expenses were of course covered, and home guarantee provisions were in effect. Employees would be given the standard six weeks after arrival to locate housing and to occupy it; during those initial weeks their family living expenses would be reimbursed. USCO officials planned to send a senior personnel executive for a visit to the island to determine whether special policies might be needed for this project.

When approval of the project seemed imminent, personnel recruiting commenced. All of the work was to be done on-site in Puerto Rico. The division responsible for the contract was located near Washington, D.C., and the project could be adequately staffed from division employees living in the Washington suburbs. There were to be three levels of management: Level 1, the Project Manager, who would report to a USCO Vice President in headquarters; Level 2, the System Design Manager, the Programming Manager, and the Administration Manager; and Level 3, several first-line managers reporting to the System Design and Programming Managers.

The position of Project Manager was initially offered to James Pomeroy, who had considerable experience with off-site projects and also with education projects similar to this one. It was felt that he would have a good grasp of the objectives of the project and would be an able communicator with high-level officials in the Department of Education. However, with four small children and a new house that the family had just moved into, Pomeroy decided to reject the offer. Next in line was Gary Johnson, who had just completed a major project at the Pentagon and whose expertise was in hardware. He had managed large numbers of people in complex military projects, although none had any connection to education. Johnson had never been involved in an off-site project, but this one appealed to him partly because he saw this as an opportunity to aid humanity and alleviate poverty in some small way. The company was pleased

that an experienced executive who had successfully managed large projects was available. He was to report directly to Joseph Murphy, Director of Project Operations, although for some questions he was accountable to Ray Perkins, who had developed and marketed the project proposal.

This was to be a three-year project on a remote island, so the families of project personnel would be moving there with them. The moves were expensive for the company, so each employee selected was required to agree in writing that the family would commit to staying in Puerto Rico for three years. There were, of course, provisions for leaving sooner for valid reasons such as illness of the employee or a family member. There were also provisions that virtually guaranteed that the employees could count on continued employment with USCO for at least 18 months after completion of the contract; in jobs of equal or greater status and compensation.

The company realized that there would be some differences in the Puerto Rican environment from that in the Washington suburbs, and no company projects had been conducted there, so John Piersall, the division Vice President for Personnel, was dispatched to San Juan for three days to determine the need for special policies. His mission was to evaluate whether language would be a problem and whether there was a difference in cost of living. He stayed at the Caribe Hilton, a pleasant hotel in an exotic setting on the beach. Although he expected to find that most people would speak adequate English, he was pleasantly surprised to find that the desk personnel, the bellhops at the hotel, and the people running small shops in the beach area had an excellent command of the language. He was not able to communicate with the maid who cleaned his room, but he reasoned that the teachers and principals with whom the PREP employees would be dealing were educated people and would have no problems with English. To evaluate the cost of living, he discussed costs with a wealthy friend of his who was the manager of the San Juan branch of Chase Manhattan Bank. This individual had a beautiful home maintained by three servants, and he had not noticed any difference in living costs as compared with the U.S. He did mention that there had been some recent agitation by the *independistas*, a small fringe group who wanted Puerto Rico to declare its independence from the U.S., but he felt that the great majority of the people wanted to remain part of the U.S. and would not be influenced by the *independistas*. Based on Piersall's report, it was decided that PREP could be administered as a standard domestic off-site project, without special compensation or other new provisions.

In the meantime, Gary Johnson had been selecting his project team. There were a number of people who had expressed great interest in joining the project, and he was able to fill most of the available positions without extensive recruiting. Some wanted to go because of the project itself, for the technical challenges it offered. Some saw it, as Johnson did, as an opportunity to work on a project designed to help people rather than destroy them. Others, who may have been the largest group of all, had visions of spending three years in an "island paradise," sipping Planter's Punch on the beach as their servants prepared exotic dinners and took care of the children. There was a little of this vision even among those who were primarily motivated by the other reasons. A few, however, were realists who recognized that the reason for the contract was that there was great poverty in Puerto Rico and that it would not be three years of fun in the sun.

There was no attempt to acquaint the employees and their families with a realistic picture of conditions on the island, and in fact USCO executives did not seem to be aware of those conditions themselves. There was no real selection process; the people who wanted to go signed up, and were matched into the available slots. In many cases, the people who wanted to go were the ones who knew about the project because they had worked for Gary Johnson on projects at the Pentagon. He wanted to fill his key management positions with those he felt he could trust, so he chose Paul Deford for System Development Manager and Fred Shriver for Programming Manager. Both of these men had held management slots under him on his most recent military project. For Administration Manager, he wanted someone with project experience, but could not find one willing to sign on. Dolores Valdez, formerly his secretary, was very anxious to join the project, and prevailed on him to make her the Administration Manager. As a secretary, she was familiar with USCO administrative procedures, and her Spanish fluency was considered an asset for such tasks as negotiating for office space or setting up new bank accounts. Dolores' mother, Rosita Gutierrez, also joined the project, as a secretary. They were the only two people in the initial contingent fluent in Spanish, but that was considered to be of only minor importance for analysts and programmers. Exhibit I depicts the early project organization.

The staffing plan called for a small team of systems analysts and planners in the first year, building up gradually to a peak of 30 people by the second quarter of the second year. Programmers would not be needed for the first nine months or so. The mainframe computer was being custom-designed and would not be available until then, and there would be no defined programs to write until a substantial part of the system design work had been done. However, a large U.S. Army project had just been completed at the Pentagon that had employed a number of young, bright programmers. Since it had always been difficult to get good programmers when they were needed, Johnson felt it prudent to hire seven of these programmers and take them along to Puerto Rico. Smaller computers could be made available for them to work with, and surely there would be important tasks that they could perform.

The Move to Puerto Rico

Twenty employees were moved to the island in the initial contingent in September and October. In the first few weeks it really did seem like an island paradise. Almost everyone was staying at the Caribe Hilton, and quickly learned to appreciate the pleasures of piña coladas, incredibly delicious fresh pineapples, and standing waist deep in the ocean just off the beach as warm waves washed over them. Apple bananas, black bean soup, flan, and sangria were discovered and devoured. Expense account living meant appetizers and desserts with every meal, at such places as the elegant El Convento or the lively Ochas Puertas. Friends and relatives that had not been heard from in years began writing and phoning to hint that they would like to come for a visit. The automobiles were being shipped and so were not yet available, but the more adventurous rented cars and explored the exotic rain forest, the rugged but beautiful mountains in the interior, and other cities such as Ponce and Arecibo. There were several world-class golf courses. The beaches near the hotel were crowded with tourists and were rather dirty, but one could travel 30 miles to Luquillo to find a large, clean public beach with beautiful white sand that was virtually deserted. It was discovered that the reason for this is that native Puerto Ricans do not swim in the

months with an “r” (September through April) because the water is too cold for them, and tourists tend to stay near the beaches at the large San Juan hotels.

Paradise, however, did not last very long. The air conditioning at the Caribe Hilton was not adjustable and was kept so cold that a number of people caught a lingering flu, quickly termed “La Monga.” Most soon became disenchanted with the Hilton, and found a residential hotel, Diener Towers, that was considerably cheaper yet with more spacious accommodations, including living rooms and kitchens. This move was encouraged by Gary Johnson, who was being pressured by USCO officials to reduce living expenses and to get the employees into permanent homes as soon as possible. House hunting started immediately after arrival, and it was quickly discovered that homes anywhere near the beach were completely out of the feasible price range. A few found modest homes in the Santurce area, which would be near the office, but most bought new, low-priced houses under construction near Guaynabo, in a development called “Apolo,” a considerable distance from both office and ocean.

The houses were one-level poured-concrete structures, much smaller than those most of the families had moved out of, and not large enough for the furniture that was being shipped. Those with more than one child would find them cramped, but they could not afford anything larger. Another problem was the time it would take to finish them; USCO policy specified that all employees had to be off expenses within six weeks, but waiting for these houses meant that many had to be extended for an additional six weeks. USCO administrative officials at division headquarters strenuously resisted the granting of these extensions; after all, they felt, this would not have been necessary in Iowa or Kansas. As John Piersall said at the time, “We are very concerned about setting a precedent which might increase the moving expenses in other off-site projects.” Finally, however, after Johnson made two special trips to headquarters to plead for the extensions the officials were persuaded to grant them.

It was becoming increasingly evident that conditions in Puerto Rico were considerably different than had been expected. Living costs were actually about 15% higher than in the U.S., particularly at the supermarkets, which had to ship most products in from the U.S. and other countries. Another problem that surfaced immediately was schooling. There were about 15 school age children among the families in the project, and the school term was starting shortly after their arrival. Belatedly, it was realized that the basic reason for the PREP project was that the school system on the island was mediocre; teacher and principal salaries were extremely low and facilities were old and in poor condition. Some schools did not even have electricity. Many of the windows were metal louvers rather than glass, and had to be closed during the frequent rain showers. At such times, the pupils had to sit in the dark until the rain stopped. Also, the language in the public schools was Spanish, which none of the project children spoke. It was obviously necessary that they attend private schools, at an average cost of \$2500 per semester per child. In a foreign assignment, private school would have been assumed, but since this was a domestic assignment it was decided that a schooling allowance was out of the question; it might have led to demands from employees on other projects that USCO pay for private school tuition. Instead, for each employee with school age children, salaries were raised just enough to cover the schooling costs. It was understood by the company and by the employees that this was a temporary raise and would be rescinded when they returned to the U.S. mainland. It took several

months for agreement to be reached on this issue, and it was the source of considerable bitterness.

Morale, at a high level in the first weeks after arrival, went steadily downhill after that. There was much unhappiness with the company for their bureaucratic procedures and their resistance to compensation for increased living expenses. Several were disillusioned by the level of poverty. It was difficult to drive any distance on any road without passing through an area where people were living in appalling conditions. In the Maryland suburbs, the employees had been insulated from poor people, but in Puerto Rico they had to see poverty every day. Crime rates were also high, particularly burglaries, and the beautiful decorative ironwork covering the windows of most houses was primarily designed to prevent break-ins.

The most serious morale problems were with the spouses of the employees. Most families had only one car, which the employee needed for the trip to the office. Many of the wives were stranded at home most days, with small children to care for, and neighbors who spoke little or no English. They were also disturbed by the slower pace of life as compared to the U.S., which they derisively termed the “mañana” philosophy, especially when they needed some service professional such as a plumber or painter to come to the house. Still another problem was a lack of telephone service; for the first year of the project, most of the families were not able to obtain a phone. Two women gave birth to babies and had no telephone service during the entire pregnancy.

Gary Johnson had been assured by headquarters executives that most of the people he would be dealing with spoke English and that there would be no need for language training, based on the Piersall report. At his first high-level customer meeting, he quickly discovered that language was a major communications problem. While it was true that most of the customer representatives spoke English reasonably well, it was very difficult for them to discuss technical topics in English. Several of them could not understand what he was trying to explain to them about how the system might work. There were also many complaints from project personnel that Spanish training was urgently needed, not only for performing the project tasks but also for everyday living. He hired an instructor to give group language classes and made them available to employees and their families. This did not work very well, however; some in the group had studied Spanish in the past while others were complete beginners. It proved almost impossible for the instructor to teach at a pace that would enable the slower ones to keep up without boring the more advanced ones. The instructor had to be dismissed after only a few sessions. Finally, a few months after the project started, Johnson found an opportunity to make his point about the need for better language training. A visiting executive was invited to attend a customer meeting, which was conducted in a mix of Spanish and English. The executive became convinced of the need, and Johnson was given permission to provide Berlitz courses for project employees (but not for spouses).

Dolores Valdez, the secretary who became Administration Manager, proved to be competent at finding good office space. Banco Popular, the largest bank on the island, had just completed a new building in Santurce, in the heart of the business district. Dolores leased the entire 17th floor in that building, nicely furnished and with a panoramic view of the city. However, she had never

managed people, and she did not like to get involved with the employees' personal and financial problems. She prevailed upon Johnson to make those decisions and fight those battles, so he had little time for actually running the project. This was a source of increasing frustration for him.

The PREP Project

The Level 2 managers, Paul Deford and Fred Shriver, were experienced in military projects in which the system specifications were well understood and well documented. The military officers who were their customers were technologically sophisticated and generally knew what they wanted. There was not much creativity involved. PREP was not that type of project. Although the Department of Education used computers for administrative record keeping, the executives involved with PREP had little previous exposure to computing or to the development of new systems. Dr. Carlos Hamill, a distinguished educator who had spent thirty years with the Puerto Rico school system and who now reported directly to the Secretary of Education, was responsible for the project. He was very competent and had a good concept of what he wanted the system to do, but he had never been involved with a project of such magnitude, and his supporting staff was extremely small and overworked. Two of the Level Three managers, Burt Garfield and Barry Cavendish, both had considerable experience with nonmilitary customers such as this, and they set up a series of meetings with Dr. Hamill and his staff to get the project moving forward.

The data collection volumes to be dealt with in this project were quite large. The Department of Education operates schools throughout the island. At the time of PREP, there were more than 2,000 schools, with 25,000 teachers serving nearly 800,000 pupils. Among all school systems in the U.S., only those in New York City and Los Angeles are of comparable size.

In their pleasant office facilities the project managers were beginning to recognize some of the problems that lay ahead. They were still involved with getting their families settled, but what had seemed to be a comfortable project schedule was looking increasingly tight. The system to be developed was still not well defined, but the volumes were staggering to contemplate. Burt Garfield analyzed the data entry requirements: for the 800,000 record Pupil file, assuming only 40 characters per record (much less than the U.S. Office of Education wanted), data entry alone would require three hundred person weeks of effort. This could not commence until forms and instructions were designed, distributed, and returned, and it would have to be completed by early spring so that files could be built for the programs to analyze. Although this was a simple calculation, the contract estimates had not taken the data entry effort into account. The scope of the project had to be cut down; it was decided to collect data on only 200,000 pupils and to postpone the rest until the second year.

The system was intended to have a planning and research focus, since its main purpose was for program evaluation. To aid research, it should be possible to select a representative sample from a large population on demand, and software should be available to perform statistical calculations on the data. As a planning tool, the system should readily provide data relating to trends in pupil mobility, performance problems, inadequate facilities, etc. The system was also expected to offer

advantages to teachers in the form of improved and timelier reports on pupil performance, such as test results and pupil profiles.

Progress was disappointing, however. Some of the problems that had been encountered included the following:

- The programmers, who had been included in the initial contingent under the rationale that they might be difficult to find later, were unhappy. The large mainframe computer for which their programs were to be written would not be delivered for several months. There were useful tasks to keep them busy, such as writing specifications for programs, and smaller computers were available for some of the tasks, but they were anxious to write and test the actual code for the main system.
- Data for every pupil and every teacher in one quarter of the 2,000 schools was to be collected. The data collection procedure was designed so that each teacher filled out the data form for each of his or her pupils. In preparation for this, the project systems analysts interviewed principals and teachers in a number of schools. None of the systems analysts spoke Spanish well enough to communicate in that language. It was found that, although most of the teachers could understand basic English, they were having a very difficult time understanding the procedure, which involved some fairly technical concepts for which they did not have the vocabulary. Some of the analysts suggested to Gary Johnson that he hire two or three young Puerto Rican college graduates as analysts; they would be able to explain the concepts to the teachers in their own language. This suggestion was resisted by USCO officials, who felt that the language problem had been solved by the provision for Berlitz courses.
- The data collection forms were printed and ready, but there was no satisfactory delivery service for transporting them to the schools, especially those located in the remote areas of the island. It became necessary to rent vans and for the analysts themselves to deliver the forms, and later to pick up the completed forms from the schools. This was quite dangerous, because the rural interior areas were mountainous, the roads were narrow and sharply curved, and often covered with slippery wet leaves. Fortunately, the deliveries were completed with no accidents.

In spite of the problems, substantial progress was made during the first year of the project. The mainframe computer was finally delivered and the programming trips back to Washington were terminated. Programming and testing was behind schedule, but not as much as it had been a few months before. Dr. Hamill and the other Department of Education officials were pleased with the system design and with the capabilities they would have for evaluation, although they regretted the limited database. The curtailed but still massive data collection effort was completed successfully, and forms were shipped to a U.S. data entry service.

Most of the employees worked hard and conscientiously, but morale was at low ebb and this was adversely impacting productivity. USCO executives were concerned; costs were higher than budgeted, and some important deadlines had slipped. A number of executives had visited the project, and most of them had been deluged with complaints from employees. In the ninth month of the project, Tom Ballard, who had just returned from a European assignment, was asked to

conduct an investigation to determine what needed to be done to get back on schedule and on budget. He was also to take over direct responsibility for the project, so Gary Johnson now reported to him. Within limits, Ballard had authority to make any personnel and organizational changes that were needed.

From his one-on-one discussions with each employee, Ballard knew that about two-thirds of them had an intense desire to be sent back to the U.S. They, and especially their family members, were unhappy with living conditions, with the schools that their children were attending, and with USCO. Their poor morale had an adverse effect on productivity. Some employees spent a significant amount of time on the telephone with their spouses, who often called to complain about home problems. It was difficult to get them to work overtime, which was often required for meeting project deadlines. The other seven employees had a completely different attitude; they and their families thought Puerto Rico was a fine place to live and a wonderful opportunity to meet people from all over the world. They had developed warm friendships outside the company and had learned to love the outdoor activities that were available, such as golf and snorkeling. These seven definitely wanted to stay, and they included some of the most productive members of the project. There was considerable animosity between the two groups, which was also hurting morale. Some of those who wanted to leave were also excellent performers, and losing them would be a difficult problem at first, but some of the most complex programming was near completion. Ballard was fairly confident that the project could be implemented satisfactorily with the nucleus of the seven, who wanted to stay, plus eight to ten young Puerto Rican programmers and analysts who were available for hire. Some of these had already worked on the project on a part-time, temporary basis, and had proved to be fast learners and creative analysts.

However, he was not at all convinced that it would be a good idea to let all those return to the U.S. who wanted to go. His orders were to use this option only as a last resort. Finding jobs for all those sent back would be a major problem, since some other large projects had recently been completed. His biggest concern, though, was the precedent that would be set. After all, these people had volunteered for the project, and had willingly, even eagerly, signed up to stay for three full years. Based on this commitment, the company had invested substantial resources in transporting them and their belongings to Puerto Rico, and large amounts of executive time in responding to their personal problems. The expense of sending them back was also considerable. By no means had this investment been recouped, and since meaningful U.S. assignments were scarce, they would not be nearly as productive in the U.S. as they would have been by staying with the project. It was an important project, too, with potentially great long-term benefits for the children of the island; were these employees unaware of that? The company's policy guaranteed them a job in the U.S.; were they taking unfair advantage of the company? Should they be allowed to break commitments without any penalty? Certainly USCO's policies were poorly thought out, but did not the employees have some responsibility? Shouldn't they have realized that living in Puerto Rico would be different than in the U.S., and that it was not an "island paradise?" Why did some employees love it here while most did not? Had the Puerto Rico-haters given the island a fair chance? Did their attitude that they did not like cultures different from theirs become a self-fulfilling prophecy? As Tom Ballard entered the dining room, he could see that two groups were separated, with those who wanted to leave on one side of the room, looking

angry, and the others with serious but expectant expressions. He was still weighing the alternatives as he strode to the microphone.

Exhibit 1

Puerto Rico Education Project - Initial

