

Significant changes affecting project management

As we once again start another new year, it is reassuring to know that the discipline of project management is not only alive and well but also thriving. Demand is on a continuous growth curve as the number of application areas expands and the business community appreciates the benefits to be derived by an organization that has grown its practice to a mature state. Many of the disciples of this growth are certified practitioners who have been applying it now for circa ten years, have moved up the corporate ladder, and as advocates are in a strong position to promote its awareness and adoption.



As the discipline evolves, it is instructive to step back from time to time and consider what changes have been taking place and to look into the crystal ball to see what the future might hold.

The move from “Brawn to Brain”

The rapid spread of project management to the development of “new” technologies is an important development particularly the application of project management to the area of information technology. This arena is generally fraught with a much higher level of complexity (e.g. more stakeholders to be satisfied) and is the result of more brain work (rather than brawn work). Also, the logical progression of the work is less evident.

This growth in “IT-type” projects has been spurred on by the evolution and enormous success of the personal computer and its application to business processes. As businesses in all domains discover the opportunities for process improvement in these rapidly advancing technologies, including of course the Internet, the number and complexity of these projects has ballooned.

What has changed in the project management arena as a result is that such projects are typically much shorter than “traditional construction-type” projects; generally involve less money per project, the products have a much shorter “shelf-life” so that products cycle through at much shorter intervals, and the number of stakeholders involved in the projects are typically larger in proportion to their size.

But above all creation of the product requires intellectual effort (brain work) rather than muscle power (brawn work). All of this means dealing with two quite different types of people who respond to quite different styles of management. And because the PM Community membership is now made up of a majority of “IT types” instead of “construction types” the focus of member interest has shifted accordingly.

Furthermore, brainworkers respond better to a different style of management and hence the interest in and demand for “new” approaches to project people management.

Growth in Membership and Certification of PM organizations

Every paradigm, fashion or technology goes through a life span that takes the form of the classic S-curve. It starts off slowly, gradually gathering momentum, travels at its highest speed for a while and finally slows down, withers and dies - as some new, new idea takes its place, following exactly the same pattern.

The same can be said of strategic concepts like management and project management. Right now, project management is clearly on a roll. About twenty years ago, the membership of the world’s largest professional organization (PMI- USA) was around 6,000. At that time, one internationally respected project expert publicly predicted, based on some mathematical projections, that the potential membership peak would be around 450,000. Today, PMI is just over half way there with a membership of 250,000. It would therefore appear that the lifecycle of this particular paradigm still has some way to go.

Even more explosive has been the growth in demand for project management accreditation. The world of project management certification is dominated by two international project management organisations, each with their own Body of Knowledge and accreditation programme. These are PMI (USA) and IPMA (International Project Management Association) with circa 250,000 and 85,000 certified project management professionals respectively. The former commenced their certification programme in the mid 1980s while the IPMA (currently moving to some 1500 certificates in Ireland) started their competence based certification in the late 1990s.

The need for projects to deliver the business case benefits

Failure to understand that managing the project, i.e. project management, and managing the technology of the project's deliverable, i.e. technology management, are two quite different things and must be documented and handled differently. By the same token, it must also be recognized that project success, i.e. successful project management, and product success, i.e. the successful generation of benefits from the product, are also two quite different things. Still, both "managements" must proceed in lockstep for a project to be successful overall. Nevertheless, of the two successes, product success is by far the most important because the success of the project is transitory, while product success endures for the whole life of the product.

The Rise of Portfolio Management

One could point to project portfolio management as an important development in the world of project management. But this can be misleading since project management is a subset of project portfolio management and not the other way round. That is, project portfolio management takes place, or should take place, at a higher level in the management hierarchy. Indeed, project portfolio management is really a different discipline, responding to different criteria, and conducted for a different purpose. That purpose is to optimize the resulting benefits to the organization rather than the narrower project management objective of producing a deliverable on time and within budget.

Project Management is Stressful

People must recognize that project management is stressful and the stress level varies throughout the project life span and as you move from one project to the next. You cannot always expect to have a steady stream of projects to keep you busy and handed to you on a plate and, equally important, you cannot expect projects to come to you. The world economy and its projects are simply not like that. Most often you have to go to the projects so that means you must be prepared for a flexible life style. It also means you have to take charge of your own career, a good idea anyway, and be quite clear on where you want to go. As in any project, it will not always work out the way you had hoped for, but having a good plan is a big help.

However, project management as a career path also has much to offer. It can be exciting, satisfying and full of opportunities and it is reckoned that it will simply become one of our important life skills for about 60% of the population.