



Project Management - Generic?

Discussion paper 6

Arguably, some projects require a greater level of technical ability or 'know how'. McCreery (2003, p.233) and Whitten (2005, p.98) discuss the merits or otherwise of a project manager possessing sufficient technical knowledge and whether the project manager who is not deemed sufficiently technical will be working with a disadvantage. Whitten (2005, p.98) considers "the project manager who is not sufficiently technical in his or her chosen industry will be working with a handicap". In relation to this paper, the question as to the transferability of project managers across disciplines without the relevant technical background is of interest. Whitten (2005, p.100) believes that a level of relevant technical knowledge is required to successfully manage a project, but the issue of what amount is sufficient is contentious.

Yeates and Cadle (1996, p.73) state their belief that technical knowledge is a requirement; "obviously, if an IS project is to be successful, then all concerned must know in detail what they are trying to do. Unfortunately, in too many instances, this is very far from being the case". The project management literature is ambiguous as to the technical knowledge requirements for project managers. Contrary to the above, Whitten (2005, p.101) suggests a preference for strong project management skills over strong technical skills; "as a general rule, it is far better for the project manager to be strong in project management skills and weak technically than to be strong technically and weak in project management skills". This is a view supported by the Tasmanian Government (2006) when discussing their guidelines for the selection of a project manager. In relation to the current research question, the arguments appear to highlight the fundamental dilemma for PMs between having strong technical ability or strong project management skills.

Like many authors on project management, Prabhakar (2005), Soderlund (2004), Yeates & Cadle (1996) and Baccarini & Collins (2005) discuss project timelines and the necessity to manage them. Often, the project manager is required to work to a critical time frame and within a very tight budget, requiring the project manager to make very quick decisions that will affect not only on the timing of a project, but its financial viability. Project time management may be considered a skill that is transferable, as in the early stages of a project many people's input generally is sought to ensure a 'complete picture' is obtained. The process will produce at least an initial timeline and the continuing involvement of the 'team' will facilitate the project manager in their decision making process with regards to time management.

Arguably, project management is about managing, and even leading, people; a view supported by Prabhakar (2005, p.53), Morris, Jamieson & Shepard (2006, p.471) and Brown (2006, p.2). Consequently, project management is not about making technical decisions. If you have a high risk project, it's sensible to have a technical project manager/project coordinator to work hand-in-hand with the project manager. But once the technical project manager starts undertaking project management, it may be argued it becomes increasingly difficult for the great majority of them to remain technically focused. Having an 'outsider' conduct 'Project Health Checks' on the current status of projects' can assist in proving confidence that a particular project is being managed well.

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