

It's the Team, Dummy

***This thought
piece was written
by Dr Bill Egginton
as one in a series
sponsored by***

***[www.programme
-recruitment.com](http://www.programme-recruitment.com)***

When did you last attend a project management training course? Six months ago, last week, two years ago? Whatever the interval, it's rare to come across an individual who hasn't got an answer to this question. And rightly so. Training courses form an important part of developing the 'skill' and 'knowledge' elements of competence. Ask a different question – when did you and your team spend serious time to develop team learning? - and the answers are not always as automatic. It becomes more of a discussion rather than a straightforward answer to a simple question. Why is that?

Research that I've recently conducted points at the opportunity for an overall more strategic approach to project management education and training. The research showed that class-room based interventions at the level of the individual – so your traditional training course type offering - do play an important part in competence development but they are absolutely not enough, and, in the absence of an overarching development strategy, may even be doing more harm than good.

This finding resonates with the recent work of others. For example, Charles Pellerin argues that “individual training, once people have core skills, is essentially useless”. Terry Cooke-Davis provides evidence that supports the need for team-based training as part of a wider organisational development programme with learning outcomes linked to key performance indicators.

As an academic responsible for post-graduate project and programme management education, I'm acutely aware of the need to 'ground' class-room based teaching in reality, to make it relevant to the work place. Christoph Bredillet talks about the risks of adopting a 'technicist' approach to education, and Lynne Crawford describes the results of a 'traditional' approach as being 'trained technicians' rather than 'reflective practitioners'. Appropriate pedagogy – training course design and delivery – can help. For example, the use of problem based learning, case-studies and project simulations. But it takes more than this if the benefits from investment in project management education and training are to be fully realised.

So what might be an appropriate response?

The research findings suggest the need for a move away from periodic, skill-based interventions at the level of the individual to a paradigm where the same individuals are able to immerse themselves in active team-based learning as part of their day-job. Such learning must be reinforced – not ruptured - by the organisational ‘pattern of relationships’ and supported by an explicit attempt to better manage and integrate learning within day-to-day project work. The ‘community of practice’ concept provides project-centric organisations with a framework for the ‘co-production of knowledge’ as part of a systematic social process that goes beyond the knowledge and skill elements of competence to become embedded in attitudes, traits and motives at all levels of the organisation.

One key approach could comprise a combination of individual, team and corporate development initiatives that cut across these levels and militate against the key barriers found in the research. In so doing, organisations are able to build not just ‘communities of practice’ but real ‘communities of learning’. Investment at the level of the individual must be positioned as part of a broader, and more strategic, development programme – the kind we see in more ‘mature’, project-based organisations whose business is about delivering commercial projects to paying customers. In such organisations, the traditional approach of project manager development is not applied in isolation but in conjunction with other elements of competence development.

The most effective organisations invest heavily in approaches that enhance the value of class-room training through knowledge-sharing activities, team based development activities and improving education through understanding best practice and improving best practice through sharing experience. With such maturity comes recognition that project management competence comprises more than taught knowledge and skills. It involves ‘growing’ people with the appropriate motives, traits and attitudes – elements of competence that can be employed to shape recruitment policy and practice, and over time, and with appropriate educational interventions, be used to build a corporate project identity and culture.

The truly competent corporate.