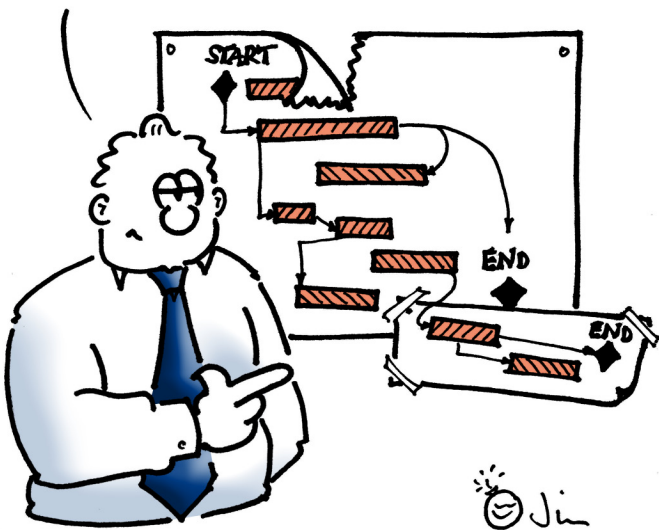




Questioning the value of project management

*“This PM lark is easy.
See, anyone can cobble
a project together...”*



A few months ago we learned from a global project-based IT company that they had decided to actively reduce the number of project managers they employed through natural wastage and, if necessary, redundancy. This is not a reflection of any downturn in workload, in fact the contrary, but it is a reflection of the value they perceive in the ‘dedicated’ project manager role. Their approach going forward is for systems architects to assume the project management responsibilities as part of a dual role.

This decision appears contradictory in a world where there is an overt drive to making project management a profession and to espouse the value that project management can bring to an organisation. Efforts to further professionalise project management are illustrated by APM’s Chartered initiative and piloting of the Project Professional accreditation and the recent research project funded by PMI (*Researching the Value of Project Management - Janice Thomas and Mark Mullaly - 2008*).

We are also aware of organisations where project managers are being asked to take on more projects such that their role is almost reduced to that of coordination and reporting rather than leading and managing. However it is not all gloom and doom as for every company we work with that is reducing its project manager capacity there are others increasing it. Investment in an increase in project management capability is underpinned by a belief that project management does add value and in order to achieve their strategic objectives they need it and need it to work well.

Working on the premise that none of these major companies are acting foolishly, we ask the questions - *how do companies judge the value of project management? And how do they justify and cope with reducing investment in project management when projects are key to their business success?*

In answer to the first question, one key factor is whether the organisation is the ‘client’ or the ‘contractor’. One of the major dilemmas we see our clients grappling with is how to justify and sell an appropriate level of project management (project manager and support office) to their clients for a particular project they will contract to deliver. The project management effort, to the uninformed or cynical, is an overhead to slash. The value of project management to the

intelligent client is obvious, but they may wish to provide this themselves and not fund a matched project management effort in the contracting organisation. The value of project management to the unintelligent client is often not seen.

Organisations that have experienced the effects of poor project management are unlikely to value investing in it in the future. The organisations we work with that 'see' the value of project management more than any other are the client organisations investing in internal projects for new product development or organisational design. Across client/contractor boundaries commercial pressures seem to erode the value proposition.

Following on from this, and looking at the second question of how do organisations justify and cope with reducing investment in project management when projects are key to their business, here are some of our thoughts:

- Without a doubt, some organisations have invested heavily enough in project management practices over the years that the skills have become deeply embedded in the way that work is done. In these situations, the project management role can be performed by others. The 'double-edged sword' of sharing technical and project management work still exists - *see Lucid Thoughts 44 and 48* - but a shared role is possible if the investment in skills and supporting systems has been effective.
- Maybe the investment has been in professionalising the support office functions so that the project management role can be done in less time.
- Or maybe the investment has been in understanding the complexity of projects so that there is a process for matching effort to need that does not assume a 'one size fits all' approach.

All of these are positive reasons.

But perhaps there is also a 'blind-eye' being turned by others fostered from a belief that project management is not such a big deal and that anyone can do what needs to be done.

Going back to the PMI sponsored research led by Janice Thomas mentioned earlier. It is notable that across the 60+ project-based organisations that were researched, a very small number had progressed their project management maturity away from a compliance approach that adopted the 'best practices' offered by professional bodies to an adapted and embedded extension of the 'normal' management. This suggests that our 'positive' reasons above are perhaps not so commonplace, and that reduction in support for project management may be driven from naivety or an inability to 'sell' the value to decision-makers be they within the organisation, or across the supply chain.

For those of us that 'believe' in the tangible value that project management can bring - there is only one thing we can do - and that is to demonstrate that value through the projects that we manage. Bleating on about the potential value of project management is not enough. **Demonstrating actual value is the only way to continue the professional march forward.**

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