



Do I Need a Project Manager?

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Overview

As project managers we assume everyone sees a need for a professionally trained or experienced project manager on every project. It is sometimes a shock to find that non project people see a project manager as an unnecessary overhead. Often we need to justify why a project manager should be involved. This white paper sets out to list the reasons for employing the services of a project manager.

Project Definition

A good working definition of a project is an undertaking that:

- Has a start and an end
- Has defined deliverables
- Will cause some change in the organisation

Typically the project does one or more of the following:

- Crosses functional boundaries
- Involves part time participants who have to take on the project work in addition to their existing work
- Changes business processes
- Has long term impacts on how successfully a particular business area will operate in the future

Differences to Operational Business Areas

A project is different to 'business as usual' in the following way.

	Business as Usual	Project
Predictability	Highly predictable	Constantly changing and evolving
Vision of the what lies ahead	Clear	Cloudy
Activities	Standard, documented activities	Flexible activities
Uncertainty surrounding activities/timeframes	Low	High
Confidence in committing to deadlines	High	Moderate

	Business as Usual	Project
Complexity	Managed	Constantly evolving and changing
Problems	Most have been seen before	Many new problems that have not been seen before
Required problem solving skills	Low to Moderate	High
Resources	Allocated and available	Need to compete for them
Resource skills	Well trained	Some low or unskilled in particular techniques
Techniques used	Well understood and used often	Not well understood by some

Differences

All this leads to the following differences in managing a project:

- Managing forward activities is more demanding
- Closer attention needs to be paid to current work to ensure any evolving situations are clearly understood as to their impact on the project
- Resources need to be trained, mentored and guided in order to successfully undertake work that they are not experienced in doing
- As the situation is constantly changing, there is a need to communicate those changes to the stakeholders and gain their feedback
- There are more problems and someone needs to ensure they are being either resolved or escalated in a timely manner
- Cross functional issues need to be managed and potential issues identified and defused
- Someone needs to keep the vision of where we are going and ensure everyone is tracking down the same path
- Selecting what activities to undertake, who should be involved and how they should be completed requires considerable attention. People generally cannot be left to their own devices to do work as they see fit.
- Managing a timetable is a more complex issue
- Getting resources will require competing for availability

Management Skills

Given the difference between the requirements of an operational management role, and a project management role, can a typical manager easily slip between the two? The answer is sometimes, but not always. The skills required are often very different.

I was asked to look at one project which was managed by a production manager. Whilst it produced reports on schedule, and seemed to be tightly controlled, it was not making progress. After meeting with most of the team, it became clear that the management was totally inflexible. If three weeks were allocated to a particular task, that is how long was spent on the task. If in reality the task took one week or six weeks to do properly, the team still spent three weeks. If it became clear there was a better way to go forward, it was not taken up. Deviating from the schedule was heresy. Problems were mounting and not being addressed because they were outside the original plan. In fact the manager proudly told me that there had been no need to adjust the plan from the original schedule created some nine months before.

This blinkered approach did not suit a project where things change on a daily, if not hourly basis. A project is not a production line. A project is like a plant. You know approximately what it will look like, but it doesn't grow to a blueprint. It changes and evolves as it grows. A good production line manager may not make a good project manager.

Managing People

Managing people in an operational area is usually much easier than a project area. If a person has a repeatable piece of work they are trained for, and know how to do, the management effort is not significant. If on the other hand, the person is not trained for the job, it is not their main job, and they have competing priorities, management is more difficult. On top of this, when there is a degree of uncertainty, there is usually stress. You put together different functional representatives with different drivers, different priorities and different expectations. Add to this wildly fluctuating workload and you have a major management issue. Project burn out is a real risk.

Project management is increasingly becoming a people stress management role. The really good project managers are the ones who can manage people through the stress of a high demand project. They spend 80% of their time managing the project, and 20% to ensure the people are still motivated and involved. They use the carrot rather than the stick.

The project manager who sees people as "live assets" rather than "human resources" may have a role in a project that is in crisis. It is the equivalent of the person who takes charge on a battlefield and makes autonomous decisions when nobody knows what to do. People will follow because they have no alternative. Using the same approach in an environment where everyone has a different view just doesn't work as well. It is leadership by volume. The louder you shout the more you think you can influence people. People react by either defiance, or by doing exactly what is requested and no more.

Impact of Poor Project Management

I was told of a project for a US Bank that required people to work 80 hours a week over a number of months to meet deadlines. When the project was in its second year, there was a change in senior management and the project was cancelled without notice. The de-motivation was incredible. People were asked to return to their old jobs and carry on as though nothing had happened. Many just walked out. Others returned but were poisonous in their departments. They were so angry at the management they became a liability and many were eventually fired. In a few months they went from highly motivated company workers to disillusioned employees.

Would project management have helped?

By better project management, perhaps the warning signs that the project was at risk could have been communicated. Expectations could have been managed. Perhaps better project management could have refocused the project to smaller deliverables in shorter timeframes, or a complete re-scoping of the project. All these are the normal activities of a project manager.

Any experienced, people oriented project manager will understand these sorts of potential issues. By project managing the close down of the project, many of the employees could have been salvaged

Project Manager Value

The value a project manager adds is to a project is:

- Manages people in a stressful environment
- Keep everyone focused on the ultimate goal
- Manage the scope of the goal
- Constantly adjust workloads and timeframes to keep the project on track
- Manage problems. Not necessarily resolve the problems but ensure they are being addressed or escalated
- Ensure all the stakeholders are aware of any changes
- Fight for the necessary resources
- Plan ahead and take actions to ensure the plans can be followed
- Know where everything is up to, and manage dependencies between different tasks
- Facilitate resolution of issues and development of a common understanding
- Identify risks and take actions to lessen or avoid the risk

Note that none of the things above relate to gathering requirements, cutting code or data conversion. They all relate to managing the work and the people. The flip side of the coin is that without a project manager, there is likely to be:

- Stressed staff not working efficiently or effectively
- Project will drift off in another direction
- The scope will grow and become unmanageable
- No idea where the project is against a schedule (if one exists)
- Problems are not addressed until too late
- Surprises for all concerned
- Delays due to resource unavailability
- Plans being created on the fly, then discarded
- Delays due to unforeseen dependencies
- Issues not resolved, or the resolution not being the best option

- Risks turning to reality

Conclusion

When someone says they don't need a project manager, they have obviously not thought through the venture they are about to undertake. It needs to be explained to them that a project manager is a necessity, not an overhead. In fact the first person appointed should be the project manager. If not, when a project manager eventually arrives, they will have to undo much of what has been done, and restructure it into a project.

The skills required by a project manager are different to those of an operational manager. An operational manager does not necessarily make a good project manager – and vice versa. Project management is about focusing everyone on a goal, and managing the resources and workload to achieve that goal. All this in a high stress, deadline driven environment. Projects requires trained professionals with project management expertise.

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Project Perfect sell “Project Administrator” software, which is a tool to assist organisations better manage project risks, issues, budgets, scope, documentation planning and scheduling. They also created a technique for gathering requirements called “Method H”™, and sell software to support the technique. For more information on Project tools or Project Management visit www.projectperfect.com.au