

The shifting sands of the project management landscape

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It was forty years ago that the Project Management Institute (PMI) came to life through the vision and dedication of a small group of working project managers. Forty years on we find ourselves in the 21st century, with a wholly different landscape for the project management profession to the one that existed 20 or 30 years ago, and also to the one that will exist in 20 or 30 years time.

If we look back to the 1980's for example, the main trends in project management were limited to publications on human resources, team building and leadership. In 1984 PMI launched its first certification program and in 1996 project management started to develop increasingly organized ideas and processes – as evidenced by PMI's publication of the first edition of the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide), currently in its Fourth Edition. Fast forward to today and we can see that there has been a significant move towards more project based work as organizations begin to realize the value in using project management to implement their goals and strategies.

So what can we expect from project management in the future? Certainly there will be an increase in the breadth of project types that will appear. The emergence of 'megaprojects' that run across multiple markets and in multiple languages, such as Masdar, the zero carbon city in Abu Dhabi, will compound project complexity, leading to a growth in demand for multicultural and multi-lingual capabilities. Moreover, we will also see three overarching factors – environmental sustainability, technology, and social responsibility – play increasingly integrated roles in the planning, execution, delivery and legacies of programme and project management work.

Firstly, environmental sustainability is no longer the idealistic vision of an environmentally sensitive CEO. The current environment is forcing a change in business values. Visionary organisations are recognising they cannot depend solely on their financial returns for ongoing success. They know

a smart customer will make 'buying' decisions based on the organisation's environmental and social footprint as well. This requires innovative project management capabilities that establish sustainable, socially responsible and fiscally prudent programmes which will become essential in looking to add quantifiable value to their organisations.

Sustainability considerations vary considerably by sector, but nearly all industry sectors have reported at least some of these impacts in recent years. The recent spike in global energy prices brought sustainability to the forefront of nearly all projects, and the complexity of biofuels, such as ethanol, create a tension between energy needs and food supply. As society reacts to address climate change, project managers are likely to be faced with ever increasing 'megaprojects' to meet energy demands as well as new population centres and new transportation systems

Secondly, from a technology perspective, it is clear that IT has already become and will continue to be more tightly integrated with innovative project activities with the use of tools such as virtual networking, surface technology and the mobile internet. Projects will be even more distributed and involve virtual teamwork. The information conveyed is the same, but the way in which it is conveyed has evolved and will continue to evolve as technological advances alter the way we share and communicate information.

New tools will be developed that will allow the project team to simulate virtually every project management decision, built using advances in technology used for the current generation of games, adapted and enhanced to apply to all situations that might arise in the typical project. The game building genius behind games such as Grand Theft Auto and Nintendo's Wii Fit will be unleashed on project management's simulation development to produce platforms to train and enable project managers to fully understand decision ramifications.

Finally, social responsibility will dramatically impact human resources in global supply chains.

Global suppliers are focusing on the work forces of suppliers, and evaluating them according to rigid and strict guidelines. As project professionals, the leader will have to be rigorous and vigilant with the supply chain and be ready to make decisions accordingly. It is clear that responsibility for the entire supply chain and its social and environmental impact will fall squarely on the shoulders of the project leader.

It is also important to acknowledge that the understanding of what constitutes a projects success is changing. In future, judgments on project success will include an even broader set of criteria than they do today and will span the entire business lifecycle, rather than just the project life cycle

This wider approach leads us to look at how business strategy will form an increasingly dominant aspect of this field – the awareness that project management can be linked directly to strategy, environmental and social responsibility, and innovation is evolving and will continue to do so. Quickly, project management is moving from a professional capability to an enterprise competency.

As a profession, project management will continue to be an experiential discipline, best learned by practice, credentialing, mentoring and job shadowing. Training, consulting and mentoring will play a large role in developing the skills of future project managers, but there will be a greater focus on a keener understanding of the relationship of their projects to business value, more sophisticated governance abilities and better communications skills. Much of the training will be simulation based and will be embraced by the generation of project managers that grew up with computer games, iPods and mobile phones.

The project management community is poised for a period of extraordinary productivity, efficiency and integration due to technological advances; and even greater changes will come as a result of globalisation, collaboration and innovation in the industry as it takes its place firmly in the 21st century.