



Web briefing - How important is sector knowledge when managing a project?

Project management is established as a pan-sector discipline, but are there (or should there be) significant differences between the way it is executed, according to sector?

While there is a common basis for all projects; recruiting a project manager to a sector in which they have no expertise might be considered a bit like asking a civil engineer to build a spacecraft or design a mobile phone.

Applying ourselves to the area of our expertise is wise. However, project management is probably one of the most portable skill sets and often the differentiation between sectors is not so clearly defined.

Project management as a discipline may well be pan-sector, but the same may not apply to the effectiveness of the *project managers* executing it, those with industry knowledge can be at a major advantage.

Why sector expertise is important

Project managers are often expected to have specific skills. Perhaps there are different tools available in different sectors and some benefit in having a greater technical understanding of the specific subject.

For example, there is a view that software design projects are 'different', sometimes 'harder' to manage. There is rarely a visible deliverable for a software development to, say, the construction of something, so arguably it is harder to be confident about progress.

In specific engineering environments, for example, there are often expectations (or usually a client requirement) that the project manager "speaks the language" and appreciates the issues because in most cases he is part of an engineering team. Without some level of knowledge, the

simplest issue described with a minimum of technical language becomes a major issue because the project manager doesn't understand it. An extremely complicated technical issue goes from being something serious to something completely baffling and unmanageable. Having the project manager as the weak link is simply not a tenable situation.

An engineering background can provide benefits on engineering projects because:

- 1) What is being discussed is understood;
- 2) Issues about what is or isn't possible and realistic are rapidly appreciated;
- 3) Knowledgeable discussions are possible about the issues to hand with constructive input;
- 4) It is possible to make engineering decisions should the need arise (with some confidence);
- 5) Previous experience means the type of risks that arise, how best to manage them, what procurement mechanisms work well etc. can be quickly disseminated

However, as a competent engineer and project manager is it not important that all engineers should learn how communicate the issue or problem faced (especially to the non-engineers) to ensure all stakeholders can contribute to solutions when needs arises?

You could take the client knowledge across different sectors (e.g. an IT project manager in the NHS could manage an office relocation in the NHS) or take the sector knowledge across (e.g. an IT project manager in the NHS could manage an IT project in Local Government). But an IT project manager from the NHS managing office relocation in Local Government might not work.

Why sector experience is less important

Project management is 'executed' by working with and through people. It is the role of the project manager to bring together, motivate and lead a team. The skill involves managing through people and getting the best out of them all – including the sector experts. A suitable mindset and ability to ask probing questions, combined with a sense of when to dive into the detail and when to stay above them are key requisites.

Project management is a set of processes, methodologies, instruction guides, tools and techniques that should be followed and used for projects to be successfully executed. Sector knowledge is important but perhaps not as important as understanding the issues listed. Project management is a universal management approach to project delivery but sector knowledge will add spice and effectiveness to it.

Technically knowledgeable experts are usually available. People who can manage and lead a team however, are scarce. The project manager needs a working knowledge of the environment but does he/she need to be *the* technical expert? Perhaps it is important to know the right questions to ask but then listen to all the 'expert' responses.

Sometimes the best technical experts make very poor project managers. Technicians can be focused on the technical aspects of a problem while many believe that 90%+ of project management is focused on people or satisfying 'stakeholders'.

The balance between the two

Sector knowledge can provide an edge over those who do not possess it and sometimes having just enough to knowledgably interact with and lead the experts efficiently and effectively. However, the knowledge can be a distraction from this management task; a good project manager with expert sector knowledge should be able to "switch it off" to lead the team.

If project managers are limited to working in a specific sector, then the opportunities for cross learning, improvement and innovation are stifled – sharing the experience widely (both good and bad) can drive improvement. Additionally if the project is low tech or low margin then the PM may need to have the technical expertise to fill any gaps.

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