

THE PROJECT MANAGER'S ROLE – ONE CRITICAL PROJECT SUCCESS FACTOR

Helena Hružová – Jean-Michel Viola – Maroane Aouni

Abstract

All organisations confront the challenges of managing projects and implementing strategic change. Essentially, projects maintain a business perspective that focuses on ameliorating results and organisational performance. Project success and competence of the project management personnel are closely interrelated. Furthermore, the competence of the project manager impacts heavily successful delivery.

Project manager readiness for successful project management can be seen in a combination of knowledge (qualification), skills (ability to do a task) and core personality characteristics (motives, traits, self concepts).

This paper presents results of a pilot survey related to the position and role of the project manager. The survey was conducted within different types and sizes of organisations operating in the Czech Republic. More than a third of these organisations were small and medium companies. The responses are analysed using descriptive statistics.

This study aims to provide new knowledge and better understanding of the important skills required in the project manager's role.

Key words: project management; project manager, competences, soft skills

JEL Code: O22, D22, M19

Introduction

Recently, researchers in project management demonstrate an increased interest in the critical success / failure factors. An effective project manager is an important success factor in projects. The current literature on project success factors ignores the impact of the project manager, their leadership style and competence, as well as other factors contributing to project success. Project managers have the responsibility to manage, monitor, and control

project plans, schedules, budgets and team to achieve a successful completion of the project goals.

1 Research objectives

The study seeks new knowledge and understanding of the important skills required.

The three key research questions are as follows:

- Which specific personality traits should a project manager primarily possess?
- Which hard and soft skills should a project manager most importantly exhibit?
- Is there any difference in how project managers consider personality traits and professional skills that are related to age, number of projects, or company size?

2 Research methodology

The research comprises two parts. The first consists of a literature review. The second part deals with skills and personality traits specific to project managers and uses primary data collected through questionnaires.

2.1 Literature review

Three keywords are used to identify potential sources: *project success*; *Project Manager*, and *soft skills*. The dates of articles range from January 1990 to April 2013. The authors limited the review to articles available from scholarly journals dedicated to the field of project management that include the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *International Journal of Project Management*, and *Project Management Journal*. This represents 219 sources.

2.2 Survey Description

The authors predetermined a set of skills, abilities, and personality traits that include the IPMA Competence (IPMA, 2006) in their field questionnaire survey within a sample of respondents.

A pilot sample survey was conducted on respondents in the Czech Republic between December 2012 and February 2013. It did not focus on a specific sector. Given the small level of project management practitioners in small firms compared with larger companies in the country, the survey was implemented in all business size-categories to avoid a one-sided distortion.

2.3 Data collection techniques

The survey uses a structured questionnaire for data collection. Comprising six sections, it covers 17 open-ended, close-ended (dichotomous), and multiple-choice questions, five of which divide into 103 statements (items). Questions are sequenced in a logical order.

The first part, A, consists of five questions. It gathers information relative to the nature of projects such as, usage, type, focus, purpose, and size managed in respondents' company. Section B, the second part of the questionnaire also consists of five questions. It defines the company as to size, years of operation, industry, legal form, and ownership. The third part, C, poses two questions. This section gathers the respondents' identification data as to their position in the organisation, and experience in project management. The participants' demographic information was not considered. The fourth part, D, encompasses three questions in 46 statement and explores project manager competences defined by the IPMA. The fifth section E includes one question and 29 statements. It discusses skills and abilities of project manager. Lastly, part F comprises one question, 28 statements that focus on project manager traits.

Questionnaire distribution used e-mail directed to randomly selected participants across industries. The participant was asked to assess statements (parts E, F) on a 5-point ordinal rating scale of frequency of use (Always – Usually – Occasionally – Seldom – Not at all), or of importance of categories respectively (Essential – Very significant – Significant – Negligible – Not at all), and to indicate the level that best represents their attitude to a given statement.

3 Research results

Data collection is analysed and described utilising descriptive statistics. Due to the range of the data from the pilot sample, the use of MS Excel software is sufficient to perform the calculations. Interpretation of the survey data focuses on the frequency distribution through limited but descriptive figures and commentary.

3.1 Literature Review

There exist numerous terms to describe “soft and hard skills”. Hard skills in the project management context generally refer to processes, procedures, tools and techniques, whereas the “soft” skills refer to dealing with human issues, specifically, the “people” part of the

project. (Azim et al., 2010). The hard skills are important for planning and control, whereas, the soft skills are deployed in the implementation of these plans. Soft skills complement the technical skills of a project manager.

According to Goleman (1995), the possession and use of soft skills contributes more to an individual's ultimate success or failure than technical skills or intelligence. El-Sabaa's contribution (2001) concludes that soft or personal skills contribute greatly to project performance and success, more so than technical skills as with scheduling. Recognition of the importance of soft skills increases as found in the research and reviews on various aspects of project management. The evaluation of the PMI PMBOK[®], IPMA, and the APMG, project manager competencies, leadership styles (Turner and Muller, 2005) to project critical success factors, reveal the importance of soft skills. The PMBOK[®] focuses on the hard skills over the soft skills as compared to the other bodies of knowledge (Pant and Baroudi, 2008; Morris et al., 2006).

Managing projects successfully requires a mixture of skills that include interpersonal ability, technical competencies and cognitive attitude, besides the capability to understand the situation and people, and then dynamically integrate appropriate leadership behaviours.

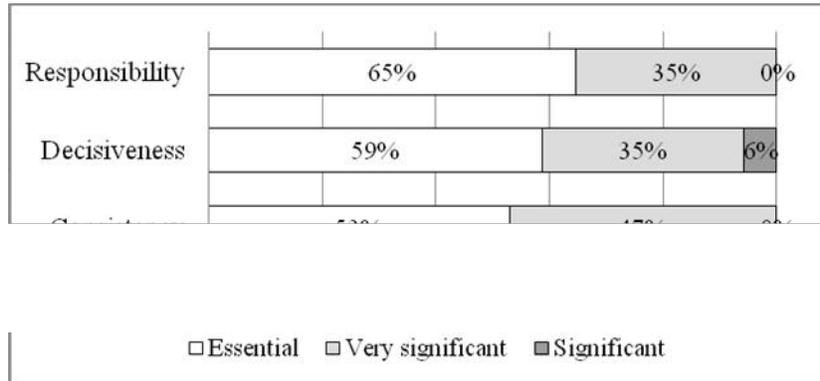
3.2 Pilot Survey Analysis

The identification part of the questionnaire indicates that the random sample represents project managers (82%), top managers (12%), and members of the project management office (PMO) (6%). Lacking were however, PM board members, programme managers, and project team members. Respondents embody multinational organizations (MNO), 35%, large companies (LC, more than 250 employees), 29%, small enterprises (SE, fewer than 50 employees) and medium-sized enterprises (MSE, 50 – 150 employees), equally 18%. The prevailing industries are IT services (36%) and telecommunications (18%).

The first research question: *Which specific personality traits should a project manager primarily possess?*

The survey worked with 28 traits a project manager as a project team leader should possess. Figure 1 represents the top three given the broad range of replies. The order is determined depending on the degree of importance assigned by the respondents.

Fig. 1: Top Three Personality Traits of a Project Manager



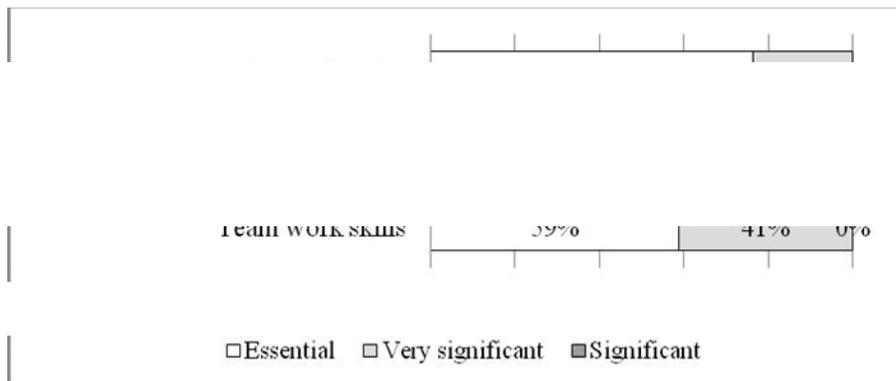
Source: Authors

Responsibility and *Decisiveness* are definitely among the top important traits. Other traits from the entire set identified as essentially important by 40% to 50% of the respondents: *Communicativeness*, *Persistence*, *Flexibility*, *Resistance to stress*, *Patience*, *Consciousness*, and *Rational and quick thinking*. Surprisingly, the respondents rank the Goal-orientation trait as essentially important at 13th place, Foresight at the 14th place and also that Diplomatic behaviour, together with the Stability of attitudes (Hrůzová, 2011) occur 18th out of the 28 positions.

The second research question asks *Which hard and soft skills should a project manager most importantly exhibit competence?*

Results of part E of the questionnaire defines 29 hard and soft skills that a project manager uses at least to some extent. Fig. 2 illustrates the importance assigned by the respondents.

Fig. 2: Top Three Skills and Abilities of a Project Manager



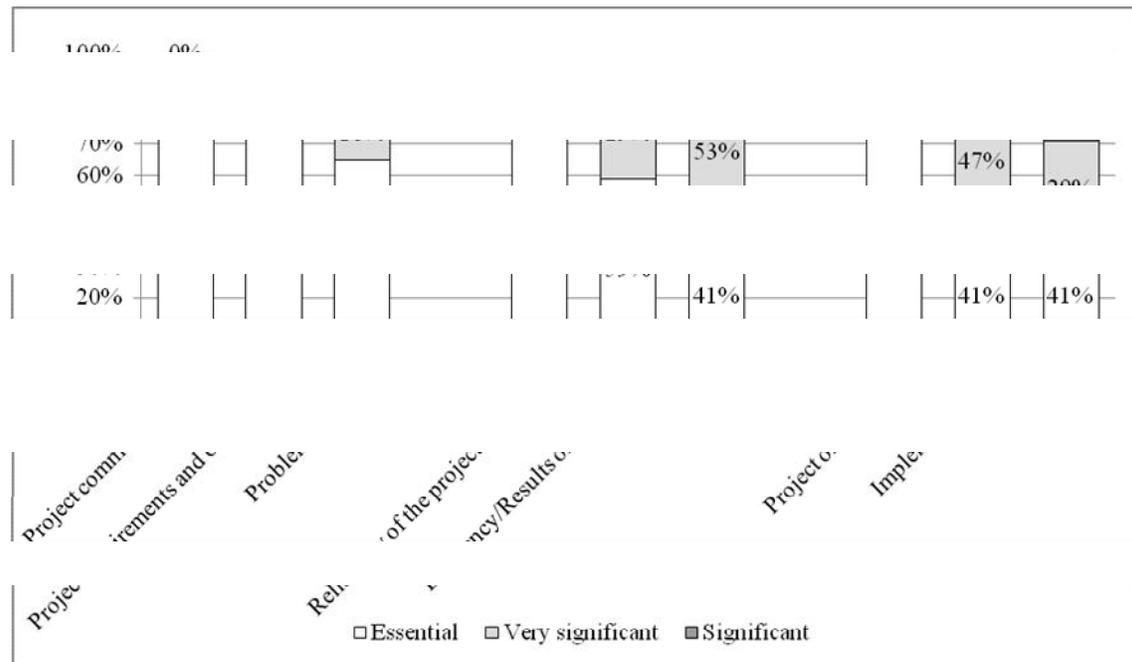
Source: Authors

It is without doubt that these three skills and abilities of the project manager are ranked highest. Unexpectedly, such skills and abilities as *Goal-setting skills*, *Leadership skills*, *Conflict solving skills* appear on 9th, 10th, respectively in 8th place, and *Knowledge and Experience in project management* appear at the bottom of the importance.

Skills should ideally correspond with traits. Comparing traits to skills and abilities as they are assessed by the respondents, one finds both consistency in answers and discrepancies. For example, *Decisiveness* and *Responsibility* are consistent with the *Ability to take a decision and consequent responsibility* for the former. In addition, *Work Coordination* but not *Ability to task delegation* for the later is dichotomous.

Figure 3 displays the results for the three competence elements that is, the 46 competencies defined by the IPMA that covers technical, behavioural, and contextual elements; part D of the questionnaire in the structure of the five defined categories of importance.

Fig. 3: Top Three Competences of a Project Manager



Source: Authors

Three competences depicted on the left side of the graph relate to technical competences; behavioural competences are displayed in the middle and the contextual on the right side. Project communication is assessed as Essential (82%) or Very significant (18%) competence while the others range from Essential to Significant or Negligible at worst.

Project communication emerges as a central competence within the entire set of competencies. Evaluation “Essential” prevails (52%) for the technical while “Very significant” for the behavioural and contextual competences.

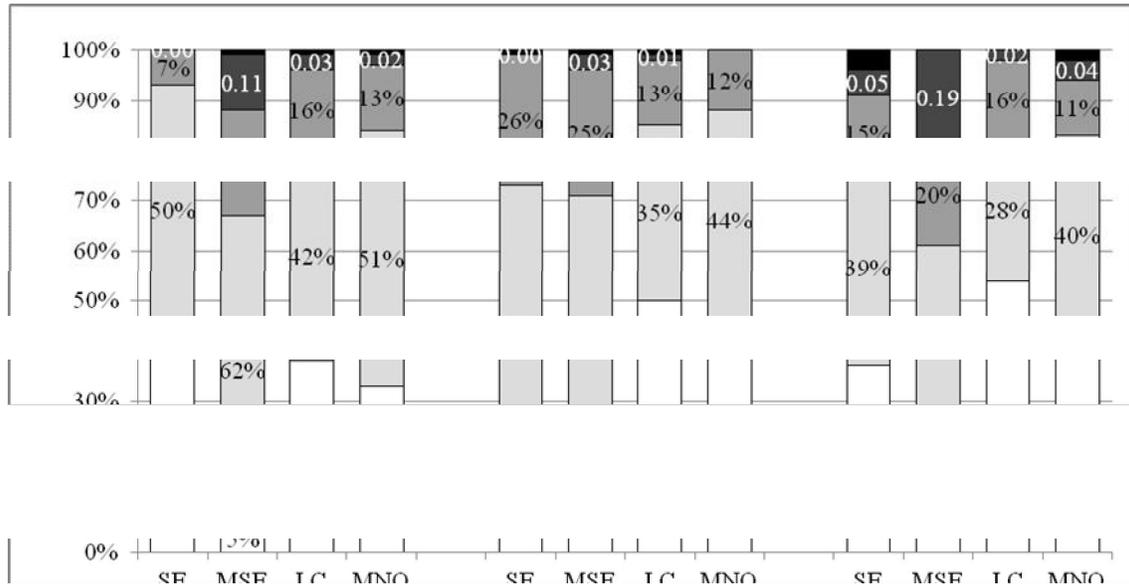
The survey also, as with Hružová, 2008, confirms that there is little attention allocated to project financial issues, project risk management and systematic analytical work. Moreover, respondents do not even perceive the potential of these issues.

The third research questions relates to the supposed differences expressed by a diverse group of respondents: *Is there any difference in how project managers consider personality traits and professional skills that are related to age, number of projects, or company size?*

Regardless of organisational size, respondents’ seniority ranges on average between 3.7 – 3.9 years while longer, 6.7 years, in multinational companies. In the small companies, the respondents were involved in 110 projects on average during their career in the respondent’s organisation and in 160 projects during their professional life. Further data of the survey support the assumption that small companies conduct smaller projects while middle-sized and large companies fewer but larger projects. PMO members provide significantly higher numbers in years of experience and the number of projects when compared with project managers.

Respondents from all companies rate the traits (the left of Figure 4) predominantly (42 – 62%) on Very significant importance level. The replies for large and multinational companies are very similar in their structure. Small companies classify all traits within the range from Essential to Significant. According to the data, the reason is either less experience with projects or the predominance of small projects. Given the abundance of projects in this company-category, the assumption is that this highly intensive work utilises all traits at the high level. Medium-sized companies indicate a different pattern of answers wherein only one trait is labelled as Essential, which is Consistency, while 11% are considered as Negligible that include *Rational and quick thinking*; 80% of the replies are allotted among Very significant and Significant level. The most essential traits are: *Responsibility* and *Conscientiousness* for small companies; *Consistency* for medium-sized companies; *Responsibility*, *Decisiveness* and *Communicativeness* for large companies; *Responsibility* and *Persistence* for multinational companies.

Fig. 4: Traits, skills, and competences distribution by size of companies



Source: Authors

The centre section of the above figure indicates respondents' replies from large and multinational companies. It contains a certain distribution consensus on skills; some similarity to that exhibited in small and medium-sized enterprises. In detail numbers, *Negotiation and argumentation skill* deviates to a high frequency in the large companies, *Ability to both authoritative and group managerial style* appears on Not-at-all importance level also in the large companies contrary to the others.

The project manager competencies in summary located to the right of the figure, deemed Essential (in 43 – 54%) by respondents from multinational and large organizations, while rather Very significant (35 – 39%) for medium and small enterprises. Four of the 11 contextual competences occur at level “Not at all” solely by some multinational companies. Surprisingly, they are: *Portfolio orientation*, *Health, security, safety and environment activities*, *Legal*, and even *Project finance*. The more frequent selections within competences are: *Project organisation*, *Project resources*, *Project close-out*, *Engagement*, *Consultation*, and *Legal* for small enterprises; *Communication*, and *Implementation* for medium-sized companies; *Reliability of the project manager*, and *Project orientation* for large companies; and *Project requirements and objectives*, *Time and project phases*, *Communication*, *Results orientation*, *Reliability of the project manager*, and *Project orientation* for multinational companies.

Conclusion

Relative to the frequency and importance of the particular project manager's traits, skills and competencies, the rating is not always as it might have been seen at first glance or as what may be logically and rationally deduced.

The relationship with business-size, in particular, the different pattern of responses for medium-sized companies, is an area for continued interest and research.

The authors believe that the requirements for project managers evolve over time in a dynamic environment due to objective and subjective reasons. Subtle evidence suggests that a PMO lead or programme manager is more experienced in managing projects than a project manager. However the aforementioned does not necessarily rely solely on *Information*, *Project documentation*, *Project control* or their *Knowledge* and *Experience*. This assumption requires further substantiation. Despite the survey data results, the conclusion remains that projects can be successful only if the person who manages focuses consistently on the project objectives linked with business strategy.

Limitation and future research

This work does contain limitations regarding literature review, sample, and results. The literature review covers solely the two main scientific journals dedicated to the field of project management.

It should be noted that the research results cannot be generalised as it concentrates on a pilot sample of respondents; therefore, requiring further enlargement. Consequently, an extended definition of the hypotheses coupled with an extended sample of respondents is to be developed. A comparative study of different cultures enhances a future contribution to both theorists and practitioners.

References

Azim, S., Gale, A. W., Lawlor-Wright, T., Kirkham, R., Khan, A., & Alam, M. (2010). The importance of soft skills in complex projects. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 3(3), 387-401.

El-Sabaa, S. (2001). The skills and career path of an effective project manager. *International Journal of Project Management*, 19(1), 1-7.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.

Hrůzová, H. (2011). *Exploring impacts of economic crisis on project management in the Czech Republic*. In Löster, T., Pavelka T. (Eds.), *Conference proceedings: International Days of Statistics and Economics (CPCI)* September 22-23, Prague, Czech Republic, 194-204. Slaný: Melandrum. ISBN 978-80-86175-77-5.

Hrůzová, H. (2008). In E. Kislingerová (Chair). *The success of projects in the international context*. In Krause, J. (Eds.), *Nová teorie ekonomiky a managementu organizací*. RIV/61384399:31130/08:00030094. ISBN 978-80-245-1408-6.

International Project Management Association. (2006). *ICB – IPMA competence baseline. Version 3.0*. Zaltbommel (Netherlands): Van Haren Publishing.

Morris, P.W.G., Crawford, L., Hodgson, D., Shepherd, M.M. & Thomas, J. (2006). Exploring the role of formal bodies of knowledge in defining a profession – the case of project management. *International Journal of Project Management*, 24(8), 710-721.

Pant, I., & Baroudi, B. (2008), Project management education: the human skills imperative. *International Journal of Project Management*, 26(2), 124-128.

Turner, J.R., & Muller, R. (2005). The project manager's leadership style as a success factor on projects: a literature review. *Project Management Journal*, 36(2), 49-61.

Contact

Helena Hrůzová

University of Economics, Prague, Faculty of Business Administration, Department of Management

W. Churchill Sq. 4, 130 67 Prague 3, Czech Republic

hruzova@vse.cz

Jean-Michel Viola

ESC Rennes School of Business

2 rue Robert d'Arbrissel CS 76522, 35065 Rennes Cedex, France

Jean-michel.viola@esc-rennes.fr

Maroane Aouni

ESC Rennes School of Business

2 rue Robert d'Arbrissel CS 76522, 35065 Rennes Cedex, France

maroane.aouni@esc-rennes.fr