

KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER: THE CASE FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

This manuscript explores two essential components of successful Knowledge Management: Knowledge Sharing and Knowledge Transfer and their relationship with the practice of Project Management. The research questions, two distinct but overlapping, investigate the use of standardised practice fundamentals and the barriers often associated with effective project deployment.

Built on self-administered questionnaires and a series of interviews, the study exposes a project management environment that minimises communication in order to deal with project delays and demanding customers. Communication channels when they do exist are often two-dimensional with electronic mail as the preferred tool. Likewise, meetings represent the principle forum for corrective action that is often negative in context.

Essentially, survey results reveal the use of internally developed project management guidelines over standardised models, the lack of time and money to initiate scheduled and positive dialogue during the project life cycle and a dependency on experience. Furthermore, the latter lacks a balance between guidelines formulated on best practices and praxis gained through experience.

Key words: Knowledge Management, Project Management, Czech Cultural Values

JEL Code: M14, M16, D83

Introduction

The Project Management Institute (PMI) (2013) claims that by 2020, “15,7 million new project management roles will be added globally across seven project-intensive industries.” In addition, the report suggests that this increase creates almost 6,2 million jobs that result in a GDP in the profession of close to 6 trillion USD. However, one has merely to enter the

keywords 'project manager shortage' onto any web search engine to be immediately flooded by numerous articles, white papers, and advertisements that lament the lack of qualified practitioners in this profession. Although out of the scope of this manuscript, the degree or characteristic of qualified practitioner warrants further investigation. The authors believe that the term does not immediately suggest certification but rather relates to a more common sense approach of effective communication that entails knowledge diffusion through sharing and transfer.

A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK[®]) (PMI, 2013) identifies ten Knowledge Areas central to project success. Knowledge areas are not unique to project management but are components of any body of knowledge. In addition, they “identify critical resources and critical areas of knowledge” (Dalkir, 2005). The literature proposes that Knowledge Management (KM) in projects links the two disciplines (Hanisch et al, 2009); “fills knowledge gaps” (Reich, 2007) and builds collective knowledge (Brookes, 2004). However, effectiveness cannot be mandated but consciously conducted (Dalkir, 2005: 15). The most feasible vehicle remains the voluntary sharing and transfer of knowledge. For the purposes of this discussion, Knowledge Transfer (KT) is defined as the organisational capture and distribution of knowledge that is often difficult if tacit. Knowledge Sharing (KS) alternatively, represents the exchange activity (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2013a,b).

Research Problem and Questions

The constraint or project management triangle has long been the unofficial logo of the project manager. The three corners represent scope, schedule and cost. Recently, quality has been added in the centre. The maintenance of the four in theory translates to successful project completion (Lee, 2010)

Both authors enjoy extensive practical experience of managing projects in the business sector with the principal contributor to this discussion, forty years and the collaborator, 10. The authors have been employed in Czechoslovakia and subsequently, the Czech Republic (ČR). They therefore, have experienced first-hand the demands associated with the practical application symbolised by the triangle. Personal experience dictates that once in the field, the ultimate tasks become outcome delivery. Furthermore, corporate sponsors oftentimes

concentrate heavily on the measurements rather than project goals. Project managers frequently lack the sufficient resources to fulfil requirements that in themselves provide insufficient detail. In addition, global impacts due to increased competition, financial considerations and economic crises stimulate the need for projects. However, customers seek quality in project management delivery but at lower costs (Hrůzová & Brunet-Thornton, 2013). In doing so, demand more for less.

In a recent survey of Czech and Slovak businesses (Ernst-Young, 2013) only half of all projects undertaken respected the project management triangle, although 57% of the projects were managed by 'real' project managers.

Recognising the mediocre success rate and the reality of a demanding customer base, the research questions comprise:

1. Do Czech enterprises rely on a presented project framework such as the PMBOK[®] for guidance?
2. What are the obstacles/barriers to successful project management?

The importance of these questions is twofold. The PMBOK[®] (2013) emphasises key elements of Knowledge Management throughout its processes. It details recommendations relative to the effective use of communications, identifies aptitudes and skills required by project managers and team members, and highlights the need for continuous record-keeping. In sum, these values serve as effective vehicles in the promotion of Knowledge Sharing and Transfer. They are further re-enforced with the notions of Communities of Practice, lessons learnt, and similar attributes.

Despite the project methodology or fundamentals used, the second question seeks to determine the nature of the obstacles that deters from completing projects efficaciously. The purpose of this question is to identify possible root causes or conditions while comparing the results with an earlier study (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2013a,b) that analysed barriers to Knowledge Management in the ČR.

Methodology

The research protocol includes three hundred self-administered questionnaires (SAQ) distributed through gatekeepers and invitations through various LinkedIn groups to participate in an on-line survey. The instrument includes a set of forty questions in the Czech language. Out of the three hundred distributed, 153 are usable. The SAQ was administered in the months of April and May 2013. The population consists of management personnel in both landline and mobile telephone operators in the ČR. In parallel, interviews were held with corporate executives of the same population. Discussions were held in English.

Data

This discussion presents only the raw data that has been rounded to the nearest whole number. As data analysis is still in progress, later publications will contain a full and deeper scientific analysis.

On issues of Project Management methodologies and frameworks

78% of respondents utilise 'in house' standards. Twenty nine percent are familiar with the PMI framework. Within this group 47% find the framework to be too cumbersome and rigid to implement. In addition, two-thirds found the language too confusing to fully comprehend. Only 3% expressed interest in PMP certification but none to date has applied.

62% of the participants agree that the best source of project management knowledge is through direct experience.

On KS and KT

Table 1: SAQ Results relative to KS and KT

<i>Percentage n = 157</i>	<i>Statement</i>
65	internal communication during a project is a luxury due to deliverables
73	customer problem resolution is mandatory and takes priority over all other activities
87	do not allocate sufficient time to KS/KT activities due to financial concerns (budgets)
58	concede that impromptu and scheduled meetings impede internal communications
93	find customers to be extremely demanding
82	project managers communicate with team members foremost by email
43	admit that team meetings are often cancelled due to other priorities
57	state that team meetings when held are often used to transmit negative feedback relative to missed deadlines and deliverables

12	do not compile lessons learnt in order to avoid internal conflicts
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Source: authors

Interviews

The interview format resembles the content of the SAQ and was conducted with corporate executives, sponsors and senior project management. Each session ranged between forty to 60 minutes in English. Ten sessions were held within the same population as the SAQ instrument.

On the theme of Project Management fundamentals and methodologies, all are familiar with the concepts espoused by the PMBOK[®]. Three expressed the opinion that such a methodology was not compatible with the ‘Czech way’ as it affords little room for innovation. Six cited experience as the best guide to manage projects. 4 stated that internal project procedures were updated regularly based on customer profile. Nine utilise a set of best practices although not recognised as such.

In respect to knowledge sharing and transfer as part of project management, all report that they expect status reports; the latter should be in writing and delivered via e-mail. Seven recognise the increased complexities in projects and communicate regularly with their direct reports. 9 agree that quality frequently suffers to avoid late delivery of milestones and possible financial penalties.

Discussion

Reich (2007:6) states that a “project is meant to be a ground for knowledge creation, utilisation and sharing, where learning is critical for project performance and success”. The statement as backdrop to this discussion reveals the growing perspective that knowledge management is an essential component to project management. Despite this trend, preliminary research results indicate otherwise.

To address the research question on the reliance of a project management guideline in particular, the PMBOK[®], results indicate that proprietary methodologies are preferred. Comments specific to the PMI framework suggest that language and complexity deter from

usage. In addition, there is a sense of rigidity associated that impedes innovation. In recent research (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2012, 2013a, b) similar findings substantiated the lack of KM practices in the ČR. However, this dependence on internal procedures does not necessarily equate to benchmarked recommendations as with the PMI guidelines. Given the number of respondents who expressed that experience is the foremost source of project knowledge, the latter varies by individual and may lack the experiential skills when confronted with new challenges.

Obstacles and barriers to successful project management stem from both knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer but even basic communication. Reasons such as the lack of time and money equally constitute barriers to effective KM (Bureš & Brunet-Thornton, 2012, 2009). When meetings are held they often consist of negative feedback rather than appreciative coaching. In doing so, team members become defensive and undermine their own self-efficacy (McShane, 2013: 148) again creating additional barriers (Bureš, 2003) to knowledge sharing and transfer. Generally, the lack of prioritisation, organisation, and communication translate to issues of time and finance. These impede effective communication that in turn, jeopardises opportunities to promote KS and KT. Although evidenced that many activities are customer-centric, the approach is reactive rather than proactive.

Conclusion

Preliminary results of the study reviewed in this discussion indicate tangible shortcomings in the use of proprietary or 'home-grown' project procedures of practice. To be effective local practices must be seen as a work-in-progress and serve as a transitional model that captures new realities and circumstances when they arise. The study also indicates that time is a rare resource often comprised by spontaneous customer interaction. To maintain its relevancy, local practices must be updated and fine-tuned at regular intervals to warrant their practical and on-going usage.

Although experience is deemed as the more valuable contributor to project accomplishment, the knowledge albeit tacit must be acknowledged and form part of the in-house guidelines. In addition, work sessions established to share this knowledge enable a more participatory approach that leads to team member empowerment.

Research continues in this area to determine the impact of Czech Cultural Values (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2012) on practitioners' perceptions of Project Management.

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