

## New Roles for the Consultant Project Manager

There's a new trend evolving in external project management and it isn't for the faint-of-heart.

Increasingly, companies are relying on consultant project managers to not only deliver their toughest information technology (IT) projects but to help realize value for money.

A recent study focusing on this trend finds that external project managers are moving beyond their traditional responsibilities to fulfill three additional roles: account manager, surrogate sponsor and profession leader.

Researchers Blaize Horner Reich of the Segal Graduate School of Business at Simon Fraser University, Canada and Chris Sauer of the Saïd Business School at Oxford University, England, interviewed 25 senior consultant project managers in the USA, Canada and the UK who had managed transformational IT projects.

The researchers discovered that external project managers are often asked to take on account management responsibilities because the client develops a stronger relationship with them than with the appointed account manager. They also become surrogate sponsors when the business sponsor is unwilling or unable to support a project. And they assume the role of profession leader because it assists in developing the supplier's reputation in project management. "Ability to juggle these roles over time," notes Reich, "enhances the external project manager's long-term career success."

Traditionally, account managers within a supplier firm act as the principal point of contact for the client: to manage the relationship, develop sales and take responsibility for client satisfaction. Today, says Reich, "external project managers are taking on aspects of this role in four ways: they're winning initial business, maintaining the relationship with the client, selling follow-on business and managing profitability."

To fulfill this role, external project managers must acquire sales skills to create situations in which clients want to buy new projects or follow-on work.

The researchers also learned that as projects become critical to executives' fulfilment of their role, external project managers will often take on client responsibilities including standing in for the sponsor at executive management or board meetings to sell the business case and report progress on the sponsor's behalf. Often the project manager coaches the sponsor on his or her role. In extreme cases, the project manager may take over all of the sponsor's responsibilities.

Fulfilling the surrogate sponsor role, says Reich, requires both generic business knowledge and specific knowledge of the client's business. "The external project manager has to rapidly build a network within the client organization that will keep them apprised of internal information and help them access the power structure so that they can stand in when necessary," she says.

The third role expected of external project managers is that of profession leader. As they become more senior, they are expected to be more visible, produce more knowledge and act as a role model. They

need a broader perspective, says Reich, in order to demonstrate thought leadership and to demonstrate the supplier's ability to handle more ambitious challenges.

So how can external project managers cope with these new roles and responsibilities? Reich and Sauer acknowledge that IT project managers, who typically come from a technical background, are not always equipped to play executive and entrepreneurial roles. Still, they say, by crafting a long-term self-development plan, junior project managers should be able to take on increasing responsibility and visibility within the firm, the client and the profession.

Here are their recommendations for education:

- Take a sales course. Learn how to influence the client as well as identify and seize opportunities.
- Take an MBA or other general business program. If you don't understand topics such as marketing, finance, strategy and human resources, you can't take part in discussions about project benefits.
- Take a public-speaking course or join associations such as Toastmasters. Become confident at making compelling points in meetings or as a featured speaker.
- Take a negotiation course. Learn to negotiate from interests and create win-win solutions.
- Take a coaching course. Learn how to understand and inspire great performance in others.

Reich and Sauer also make recommendations for action:

- On long-term projects, take every opportunity to learn more about the strategy, financials and competitive position of the client.
- Focus your career on an industry vertical and become deeply knowledgeable about this sector through personal research, attending industry meetings and joining professional associations.
- Develop a networking plan within the client organization. Get to know the key individuals and the up-and-comers – their goals and constraints, their history and aspirations.
- Establish your leadership within the profession. Reflect on your projects and develop lessons from them. Take opportunities to share these ideas by speaking or writing.

Source: Reich, B.H. and Sauer, C. "Roles of the External IT Project Manager", *Communications of the ACM*, 53:5, May2010, pp.126-129.

*PMPerspectives.org is a website which connects project managers and sponsors with project management researchers. Our mission is to understand and improve project management practices. The research team comprises Dr. Blaise Horner Reich and Dr. Andrew Gemino from Simon Fraser University, Canada and Dr. Chris Sauer from Oxford University, UK.*

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