

The New Project Leader

There's a new mindset among IT business customers these days. Increasingly, they're banking on IT projects to yield investment returns. They're no longer satisfied with an IT project that comes in on time and on budget. They want added business value as the project moves along – and they're looking to the project manager to deliver this bonus.

So how are project managers dealing with these new expectations? What changes do they need to make in their role, their management style and their leadership?

Researchers from the Saïd School of Business at Oxford University in England and from the Segal Graduate School of Business at Simon Fraser University in B.C., Canada, recently conducted two studies that address these questions. One study interviewed project managers in both the U.S. and U.K. to explore the ways in which IT project management has been changing in the last five to 10 years and why. The other study, conducted in the U.K., used an established project-management research instrument to identify the range of leadership styles now employed.

The studies' results indicate that project managers are, indeed, redefining their roles to address these new expectations.

"Project managers are accepting a new responsibility for achieving value-added outcomes," says Chris Sauer, of the Saïd School of Business. "This drives a preparedness to innovate and to engage with individuals and activities that they would previously have considered out-of-scope."

Today's project managers are finding they cannot define their role as building systems to someone else's plans. "No longer can they hide behind the mantra of 'tell us your requirements and freeze them while we build what you asked for,'" explains Sauer. "Now that they may be held to account for achieving outcomes that a client needs for success, their role must shift from being fixed-goal oriented to being business-outcome driven."

As a result, many project managers indicated in the study interviews that their activities now start earlier in the project life cycle and extend later. "Sometimes they take responsibility for the business case and, in doing so, take responsibility that the project is defined to be deliverable," says Sauer. Other shifts include a trend towards attentively managing stakeholders and a shift in style away from director of the task to orchestrator, and from resource-exploiter to cultivator-nurturer.

"Project managers also told us that they now take increasing responsibility for post-implementation delivery of organizational change and benefit," says Sauer. "They may not always have the organizational authority to deliver the change and harvest the

benefits, but they see it as their responsibility to ensure that those who have the power and authority do so.”

Project managers also reported adopting new approaches to team leadership as projects become more complex and they find themselves spending more time on business issues external to the project. While many project managers are accustomed to a traditional authoritarian approach, they are now giving team members more involvement in decision-making. In fact, 84 percent of project managers said they like working as part of a team and 74 percent agreed that teams give a deeper analysis of problems.

That’s why, says Sauer, project managers now say they are selecting team members not just for their expertise but also their ability to work within a team. “The team is now a renewable asset to be cultivated,” says Sauer. “As one manager put it, “killing people is no longer an option.”

Overall, Sauer summarizes the shifts that today’s project managers are experiencing:

- From responsibility for specification delivery to business value achievement
- From passive recipient of someone else’s brief to pro-active contributor of project definition
- From internal to external focus
- From a reliance on technical expertise to a reliance on business knowledge
- From fixation on scope control to expectation of continuing scope adaptation
- From an authoritative to a collaborative decision-making style
- From a specialist project manager role to a general manager role
- From technical management to people leadership

In short, says Sauer, “today’s project manager needs to become a more pro-active leader. The balance of the role has swung away from administration and management towards leadership.”

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. Blaize Horner Reich and Dr. Andrew Gemino from Simon Fraser University, Canada and Dr. Chris Sauer from Oxford University, UK.

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