

The Thought-Leader Mindset

IT project management is rapidly evolving. Traditional concerns for cost, time and scope are now only one aspect of the job. Corporate expectations are shifting, with a new emphasis on aligning IT project objectives to strategic business benefits.

Suddenly, IT project managers are facing steeper challenges as they scramble to accommodate these new expectations. They have to re-think practice and transform performance. For this, they need a new mindset — and new management practices.

But what kind of a mindset? And what attributes must a project manager have in order to re-think practice and integrate new ideas into a coherent and innovative management approach?

Researcher Chris Sauer from the Saïd Business School at Oxford University, together with Professor Blaize Horner Reich from Simon Fraser University, interviewed 57 experienced and successful project managers from Canada, the U.S., the U.K. and New Zealand. The goal — to understand the mindsets of experienced, senior project managers and distil that information into key principles and personal qualities for advancing IT management practices.

“We focused on how project managers will have to think if they are to adopt an expanded, more sophisticated and ultimately more successful view of project management,” explains Sauer.

The interviews, he says, yielded an interesting picture of the industry changes that are driving project managers to re-think practice. These include:

1. Increased emphasis on the strategic and operational importance of IT projects whose success is now directly connected to the success of the business. The result: a greater pressure to focus on value and to continually adapt to keep value in the project cross-hairs.
2. Intensified competition, requiring businesses to respond faster. This implies compressed project schedules to ensure shorter lead times to delivery. Project managers therefore have to innovate to improve project processes.
3. Clients wanting a return on IT investment that is comparable to other investments. They want a better outcome-to-cost performance, which requires project managers to more consciously weigh potential trade-offs in their decisions.

4. Clients recognizing the complexity of IT projects and being more willing to treat project managers as a key player. Project managers therefore have to step up a level.

In short, says Sauer, “project expectations are more ambitious, the job is tougher and delivery requirements are tighter in terms of business value as well as cost and schedule. Together, these drivers require project managers to explore new ways of thinking.”

Out of the research data, Sauer noted four key qualities that seem to be guiding thought-leading project managers’ approaches to adapting and excelling in a changing environment.

“They all exhibited a clear-sighted realism, an expanded sense of personal responsibility, a long-term perspective extending beyond the limits of their current project and a willingness to let go and trust the professionalism and ability of their team,” he says.

From the research data, Sauer identified nine core principles of thought that are shaping advanced thinking among project managers:

- Focus on ultimate value. Keep the project focused on what the organization needs to gain when making design and implementation decisions
- Identify at a deep personal level with project goals. There’s a new level of personal drive to succeed because the goals are the right ones to pursue
- Invest in trust. Make a significant effort to build trust within the team and across the full range of stakeholders
- Devolve responsibility to the team. Accept that in complex projects, teams and their members are often better placed to make informed decisions
- Adapt continually. Accept that stable project goals and requirements are an unrealistic ideal. Build continual change into project thinking
- Develop people involved in the project. Team members are resources not just for the current project but also for those in the future. Developing their skills can secure their loyalty and future value
- Orient the project to learning. Recognize that the project team rarely knows everything about the project before it starts. Practice building-in and encouraging learning as a normal part of project activity
- Develop creativity and innovation. Increased pressures can make established practices too slow and cumbersome for complex, fast-moving, and adaptive business-critical projects.
- Take a pro-active view. Accept no limitations on what must be done to ensure the project progresses.

These nine principles, says Sauer, indicate that IT project management is beginning to evolve.

“It’s not easy to apply these principles without running up against established practices,” he says. “Project managers have to chart a route that resolves the tensions that exist, for example, between embracing and resisting change; between controlling decisions and empowering the team; and between achieving short-term results and building a solid infrastructure for the future.”

Sauer says that businesses need to recruit and develop individuals with both the appropriate mindset and the skills and qualities to fulfill the role even as they re-shape it.

“This new breed will have to find ways of organizing, devolving and discarding work in order to focus where their mindset says they should – on the client, on the big picture and on value,” he says.

He recommends using the nine principles for recruiting and selecting forward-thinking IT project managers, as well as for designing training and development programs that can school project managers in the kinds of thinking that will enable them to advance both their own practice and the profession.

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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