
The Art of the Pivot: Challenges and Opportunities for Project and Program Managers in Today's Fast Moving API-enabled Cloud Computing Sector

By Donald R Hammons, UT-Dallas MBA (2004)

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the opportunities and challenges which co-exist in an API cloud enabled Information Technology (IT) world.

Introduction

Project and Program Management in the fast paced IT world of cloud computing represents one of the greatest opportunities for professional development and career trajectory we've seen in decades. The complexity of the IT eco-system combined with CIO and business leader demands that IT spend and projects correlate to direct revenue expansion, cost reductions and quality of analytics creates a significant opportunity for capable project and program portfolio managers. In parallel, there are significant challenges with such a role and this article will explore both.

Opportunities in the API-enabled Cloud Computing World

As a fan of Dr. Harold Kerzner's approach to project and program management which speaks to the complexities and systems approaches to planning, scheduling and controlling project performance, I have to say these considerations apply more today than ever before. While we'll leave the rationale behind the arguments of waterfall, hybrid and agile systems approaches to another day and paper, the opportunities that exist today for project and program managers have never been higher.

The concept of 'opportunity' for project managers rests with the definition itself. Perhaps it is defined based on a number of factors which may include the seniority or experience level of the manager, experience with prior project delivery performance (e.g. were they successful), the level of career seniority the manager views themselves to be at, and other human factors. There are also altruistic definitions of opportunity to be considered by project and program managers such as the impact upon society their projects hope to achieve, the derivative results a successful project may provide to an organization (e.g. increased revenue, increased analytic-based insights), etc. These are all valid perspectives. Thus, the old adage of "on-time, on-budget performance"

may in and of itself not be sufficient as the only qualifier for the successful manager as a target outcome.

Most successful project managers would agree that defining critical project success criteria during the initial project charter setup with sponsors is a key milestone during the planning or agile Sprint 0 setup phase of a project. Post project retrospectives as such may in fact point 'back' towards those initially defined success criteria and may form a basis for sponsors to agree that a project, once delivered, in fact met or exceeded the expectations defined proactively at the outset. This is a powerful reference tool for project managers and should not be minimized. While tried and true structural elements of successful projects have a 'look and feel' that lends a PMO audit to forecast project performance, the process in and of itself may not sufficiently meet the needs of CIO's in today's API-enabled fast moving cloud computing arena. In fact, more is needed.

My experience with prior projects, especially those early in my career, was focused on a central thematic delivery model aimed at a single platform. For example, during the buildout of the internet as we now know it, much of my early project management career was spent on projects which were ring-fenced by technological boundaries. Projects which involved single platform solutions such as SAP, Oracle, backhaul communication switches, PBX and voice communication systems, and long-haul fiber backbone technologies were all central themes for delivery on early projects. While foundational to today's internet and mobile-first computing world, those foundational projects while valuable from a career experience perspective, did little to shore up the essential skills needed to meet today's CIO and business leader expectations when it comes to a fast moving multi-faceted API-enabled cloud computing eco-system. In short, today's project and program managers have a larger opportunity to impact an organization's eco-system than ever before. As such, career opportunities for early and mid-career project and program professionals have never been higher. The project and program managers of today will potentially be tomorrow's CIOs. Why is this true?

Today's project managers are at the forefront of the vast eco-system of application evaluation, deployment, configuration and customization within the enterprise footprint. For example, a project manager whose career has been spent implementing Salesforce.com CRM may have gained a solid understanding of the agile or hybrid-agile approach to standing up Salesforce, and along that pathway, there was an understanding gained that the true value of the solution was not in the ring-fenced CRM aspects of the application, but in the platform's ability to integrate with other solutions, some from the AppExchange, some from boundary 3rd party solutions, and some to the legacy ERP foundations which most mid-career project professionals in IT have had some exposure to. Thus, an eco-system perspective suddenly raises its head where the project and program managers of tomorrow must work across a wide perspective of applications, through tight integration, in order to achieve the business-side analytic-based results sought by sponsors and clients. In this example, the same Salesforce.com CRM project professional is now looking at integration performance,

sustainability in terms of post-production supportability and a tightly integrated platform with which to implement. While this raises the collective technical complexity for projects, it also raises the stakes for the manager and with success; greater opportunities arise for the PM to lead even larger programs with even greater levels of complexity – and therefore higher incremental value to the client organization(s). Rather than a single technology focus combined with a rigid project methodology, the PM's of tomorrow are those that can quickly grasp emerging technologies and have honest conversations with their client sponsors regarding the trade-offs that exist by bringing in those technologies into the customer eco-system.

An example of the above for conversational purposes might be a PM's engagement on a Salesforce initiative and mid-project, the PM learns that the client sponsor has just returned from a tradeshow and now wants to evaluate and discuss the, implementation of a Configure, Price, and Quote (CPQ) engine into the project eco-system. The valuable PM will be one who is ahead of this emerging technology and one who can guide the customer towards an understanding of the opportunities and project trade-offs that would be required to bring in the new application – given the in-progress development cycles already underway. This is not a new thing for PM's delivering today's highly advanced cloud computing projects, however – it is critical to the long-term success of the PM that he or she be able to scale project performance across an increasingly complex and fast-moving IT cloud and mobile-first eco-system.

In addressing the opportunities that exist with such a fast moving environment, the PM's of tomorrow will mirror the technological pace of innovation and will bring the same level of creative thought, speed and innovation to their project portfolios regardless of platform or application. In summary, the opportunity that exists for the PMs of tomorrow includes the buildout of an ability to schedule, control and deliver outstanding project performance not based on a single technology, but rather against a vast landscape of ever-changing IT applications and platforms. The ability to pivot to emerging client demands, an understanding of the API-enabled highly integrated cloud computing space, and an ability to schedule releases and project value across the IT spectrum will drive the greatest opportunities for current and emerging PMs in the profession.

Challenges

The challenges with such an approach are significant. We are beyond the day when expertise on a single platform served as a panacea for project performance. Perhaps in years past, an outstanding Oracle programmer could advance to a PM level and drive projects with consistent performance. While this still exists today, the PMs of tomorrow will be less fluent on the specific or programmatic technical mechanics of applications or platforms in their portfolio. Instead, they will be required to scale their knowledge across a variety of IT-eco system solutions including legacy ERP, upper quadrant CRM solutions, cloud-based applications for enterprise content management, enterprise file sync and share, contract management engines and marketing automation platforms among others. When the PM adds to this complexity the boundary solutions customers

seek in the areas of Internet of Things (IoT), analytics and business intelligence, and machine learning, it's easy to see that the skills needed by the PMs of tomorrow are vast and challenging to say the least. In order to meet present-day and emerging challenges, PMs will need to focus on the foundational principals we all share including time, cost and quality (e.g. the old adage of pick two!), a firm grasp of the benefits and tradeoffs with waterfall, hybrid-agile, and agile delivery models and all the while keeping an eye not only on the present-day best practices with the platforms and applications they are responsible for delivering but the PMs of tomorrow must also keep an eye on the quadrant performance of emerging application players as CIO's gain an understanding around the value-proposition emerging technologies can play within their IT project portfolios. Those PMs and organizations who are best poised with both sound project management methodologies combined with the fast-moving approach to application architecture and eco-system wide implementations will emerge as the true winners in tomorrow's API-enabled cloud computing space.

Summary

The PMs of tomorrow will be the most innovative, highly educated and experienced leaders in the enterprise. Their performance is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to Annual Operating Plan (AOP) operating budget execution and their ability to pivot to emerging project delivery models and technologies will create some of the highest demand and parallel career opportunities we've seen in decades. IT today is one of the most exciting career environments for the emerging professional. Tomorrow's projects will positively impact local, state and federal government sector initiatives, healthcare, private enterprise and increasingly a direct impact to the start-up eco-system where much of the innovation for tomorrow's success will find its genesis - a central theme to the vitality of the U.S. economy. The PMs of tomorrow who are able to build foundational IT based systems while pivoting towards API-enabled highly integrated cloud and mobile solutions within their portfolios will be the leaders in tomorrow's enterprise.

About the Author



Donald R. Hammons, MBA

San Francisco, California, USA



Donald R. Hammons is a graduate of the University of Texas at Dallas MBA program (2004). Don has lectured at the University of Texas Global Executive Forum and his co-authored paper on the collaboration potential of social platforms as a catalyst in scientific achievement was presented at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA. Don has enjoyed a 20+ year career in the information technology sector of the U.S. economy and he's presently the Chief Executive Officer of Cloud Strategy firm Perigee360, Inc. and Chief Strategy Officer and Vice-Chairman Advisory Board of Directors for San Francisco-based start-up mxHERO (www.mxhero.com). Don resides in the San Francisco Bay Area and can be reached at: Donnie@perigee360.com

