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Why project management should be an ecosystem
and not just a function
Advisory   By Mike Saville, ILX Group

Why project management should be an ecosystem and not just a function

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Abstract

There are several Best Practice courses available to help project managers to improve their skills and competencies. But how do you install those practices within organisations to create a holistic environment that supports ongoing improvements in performance? This article explores these issues and provides some tips on creating a culture that goes beyond the classroom, and how to create a functional project management ecosystem.

Project management, like any ecosystem, is at the mercy of a number of different elements and successful projects must be resilient. The fact is that project management ecosystems often need an intelligent designer sitting behind the projects to make sure they come to fruition. Organisations that have more success in delivering projects are those that react to and manage the changes in their project ecosystem, taking into account the relative priorities and dependencies of their entire portfolio.

It is not hard to see why enthusiastic graduates of project management training programmes struggle to transfer their newly gained knowledge into the workplace. In the classroom there is a clear assumption that an individual will be gaining worthwhile project management skills and techniques. Yet their organisation may have different practices and unless there is clear recognition that project management is an organisational discipline, investment in project management training will not see the hoped-for return.

In a classroom situation you can teach skills - emotional intelligence for example, and there's immediate benefit from practising the techniques back at the office. Project management is different – it is a vector of many organisational functions and its success is dependent upon those as well as the skills of individual practitioners.

For instance, a HR department might have a role in defining what the key characteristics of an effective project manager might be. The performance management team might be another function determining what a successful project is. Resource planning might contribute – organisations often encounter issues in getting business units to release resource into projects. Many projects are delivered by multi-agency partnerships and this introduces further priorities and constraints. All

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these diverse factors contribute to cultivating a successful project management ecosystem – it is not as simple as training your project managers well.

The challenge facing project managers

Much has been written on the common causes of project failure. The main causes tend to be failure to lead, failure to plan, and failure to engage with stakeholders. These themes are constant, emerging again and again, which suggests that it is not the processes that are taught in the classroom that are at fault, rather it is embedded organisational behaviour.

One of the reasons project management training does not always bear fruit is it needs to be embedded into an organisation that knows what it wants to get out of training. When it doesn't work well, it is often because people come back enthused from learning new techniques but they are not quite sure how to apply them. The key to making the transition from the classroom to the organisation is that the organisation must set a very clear vision for what it wants to achieve and expect consistency in project management behaviours.

If senior management do not adequately support the need for 'planning at the start of a project or programme' – it can risk duplicated efforts or wasted resources in fixing errors later. Without the right support from the top, it can also be difficult, if not impossible, for good project managers to achieve the desired results. Strong leadership therefore plays a crucial role in creating the conditions for an effective organisation-wide project management ecosystem.

A multinational organisation we work with has optimised its portfolio management by creating rules for selecting, managing and prioritising projects. It has projects across multiple disciplines, including supply chain management, IT and product development, infrastructure, sales and marketing. The organisation was committed to a PRINCE2 inspired governance process and the framework allowed the teams to easily adapt to different delivery environments. Unusually, the chief executive of the organisation, which works across 24 countries, took the PRINCE2 practitioner exam and this signalled a clear "top down" commitment and message to everybody within the organisation.

Where are organisations in the maturity curve?

Before an organisation can think about creating a project management ecosystem or culture it is important for it to try and understand its maturity. Armed with that knowledge it can set the direction for building project management capabilities and staff development so that people understand what good project management looks like.

To extend the eco-system metaphor, some plants need to go in a hothouse before you dare put them outside, because they are not sufficiently robust and mature to deal with the elements, while other plants are hardy and can get by with benevolent neglect. The Portfolio, Programme, and Project Management Maturity Model

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(P3M3®) owned by AXELOS acknowledges that every organisation is different and is a useful tool for gauging maturity. It is designed specifically to help organisations understand their capability and maturity in terms of portfolio, programme and project management and can help to establish the right ecosystem that will enable projects to flourish.

In the Gulf States, formed only 43 years ago, government departments have benefited greatly from a recognition and acceptance of their stage of maturity. Early expertise came from outside the region, but organizations have now realized that they need to develop their own resources by understanding what practices suit their level of maturity then investing scalable Best Practice.

The skills transfer and knowledge development process tends to acknowledge that individuals have not had much exposure to formal project management so training is delivered at that level. Culturally the Gulf States have accepted that the tools are there to help them. In the UK, by contrast there can be a tendency for project management maturity models to be used as departmental scorecard to validate their success, rather than a spring board for developing further capability.

Practical steps to consider – some quick win strategies

There are a number of practical steps organisations can take to create a holistic environment that supports project management ecosystem development. These will only be successful if executives accept that successful programme and project management is complex and organic process, and that sending people on training courses will not improve project success in isolation.

- **Create consistency:** Create consistent conditions and processes. Every new project should start the same way. If a back door remains open and a group is able to get away with running a project outside the project framework, it can have a corrosive impact on the rest of the portfolio.

- **Cultivate your vision**: Have a clear vision, plan according to that vision and then prepare to engage in cultivation. You won't get it right first time – you will need to modify, develop and adapt your framework to keep it up-to-date. While it is important to be consistent and stick to processes that have been developed. There will always be exceptions to rules; it is about using the same values and determinants to reach decisions.

- **Define Best Practice**: Organisations might look at job descriptions and define a project manager's roles and responsibilities. Performance assessment can then drive project success.

- **Appoint champions**: Organisations that get this right and create a thriving project management ecosystem have often invested in a portfolio and programme office to provide performance management and monitoring for projects. For example, appointing a member of the executive team as director of project portfolio has helped one organisation to control several millions dollars'

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worth of projects successfully. The PMO houses a cadre of experienced senior project managers running the high priority projects and also acting as mentors for less experienced project managers. They are champions of the new project framework that has been implemented as well as engaging in delivery. Creating a separate unit helps to underpin project and programme management as a distinct culture not just something that happens in the line of business.

To conclude, clarity, consistency and resilience must also underpin project and programme management. What do we mean by this?

- **Clarity** – business leaders need to clarify what is needed in terms of organisational behaviour and consistency of project and programme process in the organisation.

- **Consistency** – it is vital to recognise that success is a vector that comes from balancing a number of factors – knowledge transfer in the classroom is just the beginning. On-going support and refinement is required.

- **Resilience** –stuff happens outside of our control. An organisation is likely to be more resilient if it has a cadre of individuals charged with helping it navigate projects and programmes and create an open and supportive project management culture.

If organisations are serious about making projects successful, closing knowledge gaps and qualifying people in systems and methodologies must be underpinned by gaining the knowledge needed to be able to assess the organisation's maturity and align development to the organisation's needs.

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