

Chapter III

The Progression Towards Project Management Competence

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate the soft competencies by project phase that IT project managers, hybrid and technical team members require for project success. The authors conducted qualitative interviews to collect data from a sample of 22 IT project managers and business leaders located in Calgary, Canada. They identified the key competencies for the three types of job roles. The research participants offered their opinions of what are the most important competencies from the following competence categories: Personal Attributes (e.g. eye for details), Communication (e.g. effective questioning), Leadership (e.g. create an effective project environment), Negotiations (e.g. consensus building), Professionalism (e.g. life long learning), Social Skills (e.g. charisma) and Project Management Competencies (e.g. manage expectations). The authors discuss the progression of competence through these job roles. They identified and discuss the interplay between a change in job role and the required competencies necessary for IT project success from a neuro-science perspective.

INTRODUCTION

More and more organizations have organized their work into project based work in order to achieve their mission and objectives; we have become a

project oriented society (Gareis & Huemann, 1999; Huemann, Turner, & Keegan, 2004). We need project management to be successful. But which competencies do we need? Do project managers need the same project management competencies

as other team members? What project management competencies, if any, do technical team members require? What hard and soft project management competencies do team members (including the project manager) require? In this chapter, we detail the competencies that are critical for IT project success that team members require as they progress in their careers from junior technical positions, to senior technical or hybrid positions (where they are responsible for a mix between technical and managerial outcomes), and to that of project manager.

BACKGROUND

Project management is a relatively new discipline where its practitioners and researchers are increasingly interested in project manager competency (Leybourne, 2007; Loo, 2002; Morris, Jones, & Wearne, 1998). However, we also need to be concerned with the competence of other members of the project team because they are important contributors to project success (Arto, 2000). Understanding competency is important: “Today’s focus on competence is driven largely by economics: the fact is it pays to be competent” (Frame, 1999 p. 23). There is a positive relationship between project management competence and project management effectiveness (Crawford, 2005), as well as between project management competence and project success (J. Jiang, Klein, & Balloun, 1996; Lechler, 1998; Pinto & Kharbanda, 1995). Crawford (2001) links project management competence, project performance and organizational performance. Thus, we have a strong case for understanding and improving project management competencies of those who are involved in project work. This is especially important in the information technology and information systems fields where repeatable project success can be elusive (Anonymous, 2004).

Before delving too deeply into this research, we need to define competence. Competence is a

widely used but problematic term; it means many different things to different people (Crawford, 1998a). Competence has also been used as an umbrella term covering almost everything that might affect performance (Bassellier, Reich, & Benbasat, 2001). There are no generally agreed upon definitions or theories of competence (Seppanen, 2002). Competency definitions are often poor and contradictory (Robertson, Gibbons, Baron, MacIver, & Nyfield, 1999), and too restrictive (Rolstadas, 2000). Indeed, definitions of competence change from one place or time to another (Sandford, 1988). It is problematic to define competency and competencies because these terms reflect both an individual’s perception and that of the organization’s culture (Holman & Hall, 1996). Frame (1999) suggests that socially rooted competencies—soft or personal competencies—are very subjective, more difficult to deal with than hard skills, and are more likely to lead to project failure if they are deficient. Some have even cautioned against defining competence because it may unacceptably narrow down the complex realities of managerial behavior (Robotham & Jubb, 1996). Some have argued that definitions should allow some ambiguity and reflect personal definitions (Holman & Hall, 1996). Indeed, some believe that the focus of human resource practice will increasingly rely on less precise definitions of competency (Athey & Orth, 1999).

In this research, we have taken a broad view of competence as have others (Athey & Orth, 1999; Boyatzis, 1982; Crawford, 2001; Spencer & Spencer, 1993): it is performance-based and includes knowledge, skills, attitudes, personal characteristics that can be improved with experience and/or training. However, it is not our competence definition that is critical; rather it is the research participants’ definition and understanding of competence that is important. We did not provide a competence definition for the research participants because we did not want to influence or curtail any answers.

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