

As part of an occasional series, we publish here 'Searching Matters'. In this edition we discuss the 'Universal Project Manager' - the idea that the most able project professionals can manage any project, in any sector.

Searching Matters

The Universal Project Manager

"Finding the people we need is like pulling hen's teeth!" How many times has this plaintive cry been heard from a business manager trying to recruit able project professionals? In seeking to manage customer delivery, streamline business processes or to transform a business organisation, senior managers are now likely to choose project management to drive the work. However, when they set out to find people capable of managing the project, they often find recruitment to be difficult. This can lead them to suspect that the people they need are in very short supply or even that they are not available. The most able people will always be perceived to be in short supply; however experience indicates that many of the concerns expressed about the shortage of able project management professionals are over-stated. Approached in the right way, the problem is not as great as it at first appears.

Project management is very young in comparison with other professions, with roles requiring an extensive range of skills. The field is complex and continues to evolve. We offer here a fresh approach, known as '[Twenty Keys](#)', providing a more useful way to understand a project management role and the abilities needed of people who can be expected to succeed. [Twenty Keys](#) has been developed to improve the success and reliability of project management recruitment and a framework to use when setting the career direction of project management professionals.

The context and skills of the job

Frustration can result from an assumption that experience of a particular technology, industry or business sector is a pre-requisite for a project manager and that an appropriate specialist has to be found. While this can be true, success in project management is more usually dependent on abilities recognised to be universal among all able project management professionals, working in all sectors. A balance has to be struck here based on a practical understanding of the key attributes of the project manager to be appointed. In setting that balance, it needs to be appreciated that while sector and technology knowledge and experience is a part of the context of a project, it is not the essential substance of project management.

There are plenty of examples of very successful appointments where this has been realised to advantage. A project manager who had spent 20 years managing projects to build ships and is now managing contracts to install advanced printing systems. Another was leading projects to develop G3 telecommunication systems and is now managing the development and manufacture of pharmaceutical research equipment. Two others I can recall are now successful project management consultants, working within large financial service businesses to help them to transform their organisation and working practices. One of these was an academic, the other an IT Manager.

PMSelect

...building careers in Project Management

Able project management professionals are there to be found. Recruiters must know how to interpret the context of any project management role and be able to assess the management skills of candidates, before they can compile a useful short-list.

The Universal Project Manager

The IPMA (International Project Management Association) chose the theme of 'Universality' at their last annual Congress. This idea, expressed at its simplest, claims that an accomplished project manager can perform any project management role successfully, regardless of the sector, technologies used, or any other technical aspect of the work. A project manager, in other words, is a project manager who can manage projects - any project.

The management community has little difficulty in accepting that people qualified in accounting, mechanical engineering, retail, industrial engineering or IT competence have a universal competence. These people can be confidently deployed into different sectors and types of enterprise. We clearly have some way to go before project management is recognised in the same way. This perception, while understandable in an emerging discipline, limits the development of project management and the prospects for those seeking to pursue a career in the discipline.

Much of the history of project management lies in civil engineering, building and defence, where extensive resources need to be controlled or there are high levels of complexity. From the late 60s, the discipline began to migrate into all most other sectors, both public and private. By the mid-80s, business process improvement projects, in becoming more ambitious, found that they needed formal project management methods. More recently, in response to the unprecedented demand for change and business transformation, projects are being deployed to re-create and 're-invent' businesses. These developments are extending the scope of the project manager, emphasising different skills and personal qualities. New insights into the essential attributes of the universal project manager are emerging as the profession grows.

Professional bodies are serving to advance their cause but in the meantime businesses are being limited through an apparent shortage of able professionals. We can reduce the perceived shortage by reminding ourselves how the most able project managers actually distinguish themselves.