Disruption and the New Project Management Paradigm

By Donald R. Hammons, MBA

The injection of cloud computing models, rapid application development lifecycles and businesses’ need to drive velocity and value will disrupt traditional project management delivery models in favor of rapid paced delivery, agile development and a new skillset demand for 21st Century Project Management professionals.

Why the Shift?

During the Information Technology (IT) and internet boom of the 1990’s, many technical professionals moved their career into the project management field. With standards-based best practices driven by organizations such as the Project Management Institute (PMI) and other organizations and with an early left-to-right ‘engineering’ focused methodology, PM’s found high paying positions with the associated professional albeit academic framework available to drive success. The view was that educated PMs could find career trajectory and success by mastering the ‘known’ set of best practices associated with traditional thinking within the project management profession by leveraging such competencies as schedule management, risk management, budget management, scope management, etc.

While this was certainly true from a career perspective, most PMs would perhaps agree that this ‘commodity’ based approach to project management did not always drive either career success, higher salaries or more importantly, project delivery success in the eyes of project sponsors.

As the field of project management has matured with new entrants into the field, the ‘commodity-based’ approach to project management has also served to drive ‘down’ the entry-level and experienced salary levels of many PMs (particularly contractors) as the field became flooded with certification providers and PM applicants – often making it difficult for hiring firms to differentiate between those who looked like solid PMs on paper but who once on boarded would not be able to necessarily drive project delivery success due to organization challenges with project delivery or lack of ‘real life’ project expertise on the part of PM practitioners. This combined with national economic downturns created challenges for many in the profession where the availability of high-salary level positions is concerned.

With the emergence of rapid velocity cloud-based software-as-a-service (SaaS) and Platform-as-a-Service (PaaS) development frameworks, PMs are now forced to make a transition towards more disruptive technologies and a ‘rethinking’ or ‘shift’ from traditional ways of thinking if the fundamental goal is to be achieved which is: delivering...
high value PM professional services on the back of rapid-fire project success for clients. As technology becomes more disruptive to CIOs and traditional IT organizations, so goes the ‘disruptive’ need within the PM profession to ‘rethink’ how projects can best be delivered and to disrupt the actual perception on the ‘real’ role of the professional project manager.

Science or Art?

Whether successful project managers consider the profession to be more science or art is certainly a topic for ongoing debate and a question we will all continue to wrangle with. The reality is that successful project engagements have a ‘look and feel’ and that evaluation can lead to a determination on a project’s health. For example, many PM training courses advocate rigor with respect to ‘what a healthy project looks like’ and the associated audits conducted for in-flight project engagements, often supported by enterprise-level PMO’s, can certainly lead to an evaluation or commentary on the ‘perceived’ health of a project or program.

However, the most seasoned professionals in the field will also perhaps share the viewpoint that just because a project achieves a ‘pass’ score on an audit, it does not necessarily correlate to the ‘perception’ or ‘reality’ that a project is actually successful when viewed by stakeholders. Often times, PMs are challenged to do what it takes to pass a PMO audit or phase gate, just for the sake of clearing the audit hurdle but with no correlation to project performance on the ground.

While no one would advocate an abandonment of best practices or even project delivery health check evaluations, most would perhaps agree that this ‘science’ approach alone is not enough to ensure project success, especially with the rapid paced cloud IT project engagements now prevalent in the field. Thus, one has to consider the ‘art’ of the profession as a natural counter-balance to successful project delivery.

Herein lies one of the biggest challenges for PM professionals because the ‘art of project management’ is a more complex discussion topic, it is not a commodity deliverable and because it involves such complex issues as human dynamics, team orientation, organizational politics and the fact that ‘chemistry’ cannot be undervalued whether on project teams or between PM professionals and their customer sponsors.

Disruption and the new Paradigm for PM Professionals

There is no secret that information technology is undergoing a disruptive phase. In traditional schools of thought, the concept of disruption often has a negative connotation. However, the term in recent years has taken on a new positive meaning for businesses as IT organizations continue to be pressured to be more ‘business centric’ and CIOs are on their heels with regard to rapidly driving IT value to the business while driving down costs.
Thus, cloud computing and SaaS providers such as Salesforce.com and others are leading this disruptive charge on the technology front. This shift towards rapid paced cloud technologies and the associated injection of such technologies as mobile solutions and social platforms such as Facebook, Yammer and Jive are creating new opportunities for developers and technical experts.

However, many of these applications are not pure plug and play solutions – particularly at the enterprise level where cloud platforms are often required to ‘integrate’ or consume data from legacy IT stack systems such as ERP platforms, master data systems, eBI platforms, etc. This complexity within the IT eco-system and the fact that cloud solutions can be rapidly configured and developed upon, forces a disruption to traditional thought in the area of project delivery for PM professionals.

Thus, understanding the history of project management, adoption of the perspective that both the science and the art of project management are required, evaluating project delivery approaches (such as Agile/Scrum) and PMs having a full understanding of the new emerging disruptive technologies will be paramount for PMs in the 21st Century.

This ‘disruptive’ ideology specific to the PM profession will force PMs to also challenge the age-old academic arguments between waterfall approaches and agile / scrum delivery models and will certainly be skillsets the outstanding project management professionals of tomorrow will require – if they are to find success in driving career trajectory, higher salaries and the ‘perception and reality’ that their projects, in the eyes of their sponsors, are truly a success!
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donald R. Hammons, MBA

Donald R Hammons began his career in the US Navy Telecommunications field and has spent the past 20 years delivering successful IT and Cloud project engagements for enterprise clients in North America and Asia-Pacific. His clients have included Lucent Technologies, Deutsche Bank AG, Alcatel SA of France, Appirio Inc. and Dr Pepper Snapple Group. Don is presently the CEO and Chairman of Majorca Group Consulting, LLC and is the Vice President for Client Solutions-Cloud/Mobility Verticals with Dibon Technologies, Inc. Don holds a Master’s PM certification from the University of Texas at Dallas, a Bachelor of Science in Business Education from the University of Central Arkansas and an MS/MBA graduate degree from the University of Texas at Dallas. Don is a prior National Management Association (NMA) Chapter Manager of the Year. He can be contacted at donald.hammons@gmail.com.