Can Project Managers manage projects across different industries with limited Industry Specific Experience?

Ranelle Cliff, CPPM

Abstract

I am at that awkward point in my career: mid-30s, at the conclusion of a long secondment with a client, in a foreign city, and it seems that every day I am faced I am grappling with two questions… How did I get here? And where to next?

The idiomatic expression ‘Square peg in a round hole’ could be used to describe my career to date; I was navigating a Major Fleet Unit in the Royal Australian Navy when it wasn’t common for women to be in that billet and although I work in an engineering firm, I have a Bachelor of Arts, with a major in English Literature in lieu of an Engineering degree. Neither of these activities or qualifications guarantee success as a Project Manager – but I’ve had that on my business cards for at least the last 10 years and been certified as such by the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM). Through examining my experiences I’ve come to the conclusion that success as a Project Manager is more often determined by how the project is delivered not what is being delivered.

Introduction

This article will compare sector specific experiences across a number of industries to demonstrate that how the Project Manager delivers the project contributes more to the success of the project than their technical knowledge. Therefore it follows that the PM can transfer across and between industries. As such the core Project Management competencies are fundamental to the success of project management, not industry specific knowledge or qualifications.

Due to length constraints, this article is limited to the examination of the implementation of two of the nine PMBOK defined competencies. All examples are drawn from my personnel experiences in Australia and Asia.

Integration Management

Integration Management is the term used in PMBOK to describe the co-ordination of diverse components into a project in an effective and efficient manner to result in project success. It is a reasonably straight forward assumption that if you have been working within a particular environment (say a car manufacturing plant) that you have a knowledge of the components of a project, however it does not mean that you will be an expert at co-ordinating the diverse components, or, perhaps more importantly in a competitive market place, be able to capitalise on innovation.
In practicing Integration Management the PM needs to do more than collecting known variables and assembling them in known ways - the PM is usually operating in an environment of change or an environment which differs from previous Projects, and therefore needs to explore the sources of data, collect data, test the conditions, engage stakeholder and craft and implement a defined plan to integrate the diverse components. For example a Site Investigation not only requires the coordination of sub-contractors, technical specialists, laboratory testing timelines and quality requirements of the materials; but also an understanding of the Client’s drivers and priorities for the project, and the underlying geological conditions of the site. Successful integration and data flow management is required to ensure that the Site Investigation is successful for the Client.

That is a Site Investigation for Client A who is investing in a gas processing facility in a remote location will differ from a Site Investigation for Client B who is rolling out suburban maintenance facilities.

Thus the PM cannot roll out previous mobilisation plans and laboratory schedules in each project. In order to be successful (i.e. delivering what the Client requires) the PM must approach the identification and integration of all information in a structured and methodical manner to ensure that the structure is appropriate and the data flows correctly.

Similarly a Corporate Real Estate project requires the integration of both the tangible particulars of the number of desks and chairs, together with an understanding of; the flows between Business Units; drivers of perceived requirements from the staff and management; local construction practices and regulations; overlayed upon the relationship between technology and other infrastructure that is available and required by that particular client.

That is the PM must implement a structured environment for the collection of data, as well as ensuring that data flows to the correct project team function in order to deliver an office fit out that is appropriate to the commissioning client.

The process of identification and integration is similar in both examples. In both examples presented the PM cannot solely rely on their individual knowledge, but implement a systematic approach to the project to uncover the unknowns and the individual peculiarities of the Client and the site of a particular project. Success is determined by the implementation of a co-ordinated approach to interrogating and understanding technical knowledge around resources, an exploration of organisational or stakeholder wishes, requirements and prejudices, a structured way of documenting and comparing the drivers or processes required, including available lessons learnt.

Technical knowledge is an input to the Integration Management process. However, the system that the PM deploys to capture and evaluate the knowledge will have more of an impact on the success of the project than the PM’s individual technical knowledge. For example, it is quite possible that a Site Investigation may deliver an accurate profile of the soil conditions, but if it fails to address the Client’s purpose for the site (structural
requirements for a future facility) or is delivered after a decision is required for future financial investments then the value of the site investigation is reduced, perhaps significantly. Similarly, an office fit out which fails to support the Business occupying the space is just a collection of furniture and not an investment in the productivity of the firm.

Communications

The PM will often be cast in the role of Oracle for the project – the one with all the data to hand and available to answer any question at any time. While this may be true, the practice of the Communication competency is more accurately concerned with the distribution of quality project information in a timely fashion. The PM in any project must constantly be querying, to whom is the information going and why do they need it?

In the Navy, the PM for a deployment – or the Navigator, will be maintaining statistics around how far the ship has travelled against its planned track, how much fuel has been consumed, how many of the deployment objectives have been achieved to date etc. This is valuable data, but in order to be successful, the Navigator must understand that the stakeholders are more concerned with the information that results from the data and not the data itself. For example, a Commanding Officer will be less concerned with how much fuel has been consumed; rather they will be more concerned with how far the remaining fuel will take the ship and under what circumstances. Similarly he will be more interested in understanding early, any threat to the ship being able to achieve its planned destination on time. In this circumstance ‘early’ means at a time where an alternative plan or contingency plan can be implemented.

Similarly in a more traditional engineering environment, the PM must constantly endeavour to understand why information is being requested, and what additional information may contribute to the Client’s better understanding of the state of the Project. For example, when delivering projects in remote communities, a delay of four weeks during the design phase may push the construction period into an undesirable or unusable weather period (e.g. North Australian wet season) which actually results in a six month delay to the project. A successful PM, will not just communicate progress against the planned schedule, but also communicate likely outcomes before the delay takes effect so that the Client is fully informed prior to the event and the opportunity for a contingency plan to be implemented has passed.

Both these examples require the PM to be more than a data collector and regular report writer. Rather, they demand the PM understand the value of the data and the circumstances of the project in order to present timely and compelling communication to stakeholders.

A PM with experience working with a Client, or doing similar projects, may be at an advantage in identifying consequences, but not to the exclusion of competent PMs without similar experience from analysing the situation, the consequences and presenting the case for the stakeholders at an appropriate point in time.
Conclusion

While there will always be a place for technical experts and experienced industry professionals amongst the ranks of PMs, the lack of these attributes should not be a barrier of entry to the profession or an indicator of the likely success of a PM. Indeed, it is through the structure and rigour that the PM brings to the delivery of the Project in the practice of the nine core competencies, that the PM will have most impact. Successful PMs are skilled in eliciting the solutions from a team of technical experts, empowered stakeholders and professional consultants; not necessarily the owners of the solutions.

About the Author

Ranelle Cliff

Shanghai, China

Ranelle Cliff has experience across several industries in delivering a diverse range of projects to both public and private clients. Joining Arup in March 2007 Ranelle has been instrumental to the Program and Project Management group’s success in in Perth, Singapore and Shanghai. She is well versed in all the elements of project management, in both the application to projects and the training of new staff. Her skills in communicating with different Clients, organising geographically diverse and multi-disciplinary resources are an essential element to her abilities in leadership and management, in particular Stakeholder management. Ranelle has maintained her status as a Certified Practicing Project Manager (CPPM) with the Australian Institute of Project Management since 2007.

Ranelle joined Arup from the Defence Industry where she spent 3 years working on acquisition and integrated logistic support projects for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). This was preceded by nine years’ service in the RAN, culminating in an operational deployment as Navigating Office of a major fleet unit.

Ranelle is currently on a leave of absence from Arup, pursuing studies in Mandarin in Shanghai. She can be contacted at ranelleishere@gmail.com