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A note on accessing and utilizing collective experience
in project-based organizations
Commentary   by Alan Stretton

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INTRODUCTION

Most organizations face a familiar situation – namely how to retain and utilize the collective experience of the people in the organization. Retaining expertise tends to be particularly difficult in many project-based organizations, because of the typically high mobility of project managers and other project people. In this regard large project-based organizations generally have some advantage, because they are better positioned to retain project people between projects.

Evidently different project-based organizations will have developed their own approaches to accessing and utilizing their collective experience. A good deal of my working life was spent in large project organizations, particularly Lend Lease and its subsidiary Civil & Civic (C&C), and this paper reflects some of their experiences in addressing these types of problems (or opportunities in disguise, as one of C&C's chief executives was fond of saying).

SOME APPROACHES TO "TAPPING IN" TO EXISTING EXPERIENCE

Over a period of time Lend Lease/Civil & Civic developed very substantial documentation indeed on best practice on our projects. There were still instances where some of this recorded best practice was ignored, but generally only once!

However, on a more immediate ongoing level, Civil & Civic used quite a range of ways to try and get the wider experience currently in the organization to benefit individual projects. These included

- An "old bull/young bull" approach
- Actively seeking out existing in-company experience
- Project Control Groups (PCGs)
- Design Advisory Groups

An "old bull/young bull" approach

Until well into the 1950s, there had not been a single professional engineer engaged in the construction sector of the Australian building industry. Civil & Civic broke the mould in engaging young professional engineers (and some other professionals such as architects and quantity surveyors) to undertake the responsibilities of project managers. As a result, we tended to have relatively young project managers in charge of our projects. This had the advantage of their being able to contribute enormous amounts of youthful energy to their projects, together with the associated self-confidence of youth.

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However the latter also had a down-side, in that young self-confident project managers were prone to (unwittingly) re-invent the wheel. Once we had got to the point where we has reasonable numbers of more experienced project managers, we were in a position to couple an experienced "old bull" with a less experienced "young bull". The latter was still in charge, but if he messed up through failure to keep the "old bull" fully in the loop, woe betide him.

Actively seeking out existing in-company experience

Whether or not an "old-bull/young bull" situation was in place, project managers were required to actively search for appropriate existing in-company experience if they even suspected this to exist. This was comparatively easy to initiate if an "old bull" was in place, as the latter would normally have a more extensive in-company network to access. If not, access to the latter could be facilitated by contacting members of the Project Control Group (see below), or the Design Advisory Group (also below). Once again, if the project manager messed up, and had not sought out appropriate existing in-company experience, he could expect appropriate censure.

Project Control Groups (PCGs)

As I have discussed in previous articles, Civil & Civic mandated the use of Project Control Groups (PCGs) for all its projects from 1963. Essentially the PCG was a project governance tool, rather like the board of directors of a public company, and was primarily concerned with strategic decision making, project performance reviews, and the like. Permanent members of the PCG were the client and the project manager. Other members of the PCG changed over the course of a project, to ensure that its members' areas of expertise matched the dominant attributes of the particular project phase currently being reviewed. This enabled PCG members to give positive expert guidance as part of their reviews of project performance, and also to act as channels for accessing further expertise.

Design Advisory Groups

Civil & Civic used Design Advisory Groups to assist in maintaining a consistently high standard of design for all its projects. There were generally five high-level regular members covering key project design areas, with additional people coopted as appropriate. The position with these groups in relation to contributing expertise was similar to the PCG, but with particular focus on the all-important project design phase.

CONCLUDING

The above approaches were developed over many years, and worked quite well. However, we still had our share of problem projects. It would be interesting to know how other project-based organizations have gone about trying to access and utilize their collective experience.

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About the Author

Alan Stretton, PhD

Faculty Corps, University of Management
and Technology, Arlington, VA (USA)

Life Fellow, AIPM (Australia)

Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program.   Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 140 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.

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