

## **Addressing talent management in the project management world**

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### **Abstract**

Organisations face an uphill battle to attract and retain the most talented project managers. Project management does not have a widely recognised or defined career path and organisations have to address this issue by creating their own individual “career lifecycle” for project managers encompassing hiring, training, coaching and developing a more varied career path. In this article, Dennis Sheehan of ILX Group and Chris Jones of Progility Recruitment, set out the drivers for the talent shortage in project management and common mistakes organisations are making in managing project managers. The article describes a number of practical steps organisations can take to address these challenges.

### **Introduction**

Employers, once in a position of power over employees, are no longer in control. According to Bersin by Deloitte’s ‘Predictions for 2015’,<sup>1</sup> “Today, thanks to social media and tremendous transparency in the job market, people with in-demand skills are flooded with targeted job opportunities online<sup>2</sup>. One recent survey showed that two-thirds of all software engineers believe they could find a better job within 60 days if they just tried. The war for talent is over—and talent won.” Within the context of project management the challenge is even greater. In fact, over a third of companies plan to hire staff with project management skills in the next 12 months.<sup>3</sup>

Organisations face an uphill battle to attract and retain the most talented project managers. Project management does not have a widely recognised, defined career path and organisations are having to address this issue by creating their own individual “career lifecycle” for project managers – encompassing hiring, training, coaching and developing a more varied career path.

### **The war for talent**

Organisations need to manage their best project management talent actively. If they don’t, good people will leave. There is a massive project management skills shortage and far more demand for high quality project managers than there are great project managers available. A project manager who is versatile enough to adapt to all types of projects is a rare find. So, when organisations find good project managers they need to hold on to them. Successful

retention is closely linked to effective management and project managers who are allocated to projects that match their skills and interests are more likely to stick around than those handed the same type of project for the sixth time.

Globalisation is having a huge impact on the war for talent. Social media is making it very easy to approach potential candidates from any country in the world and there is an increasing expectation that people will be looking for the opportunity to develop their careers globally. Fast developing economies such as those in China and the UAE are fuelling the demand for skilled project managers. Alongside putting swathes of their own management staff through project management training they are looking to supplement local talent with the best project managers from the international pool of talent. As the pace of innovation accelerates there is a high level of competition throughout the world for the best people to manage change.

Project managers are increasingly looking to accreditations and training that will help them keep pace with Best Practice and develop new ideas. Companies who want to hold on to their best talent need to foster development through training in Best Practice and also provide diverse challenges. This is easier for some organisations than others. Some sectors, such as construction and IT will be limited to offering their project managers construction or IT projects. Others will be in a position to offer a wider variety of projects and challenge their project managers so that they learn more.

Organisations that focus on one activity do have the advantage of being able to provide a clear development path for their project managers who are all engaged in similar work and can aim for promotion through the ranks. On the other hand, more agile organisations offering a wider range of projects may face the challenge of rewarding high-flying project managers with clear career progression within a flatter organisational structure.

### **Keeping up with changes**

Organisations who are failing to attract and retain project manager talent tend to be those who are not providing ongoing and relevant training to develop their staff. Project managers at these organisations soon begin to feel they are stagnating and their skills are falling behind the marketplace and start to look for the next opportunity.

Unsuccessful projects invariably result from the wrong people being in key decision making roles. Too often the top level steering group consists of people who do not know enough about project management to evaluate whether or not the project manager is doing a good job. Frequently they do not have a basic understanding of project governance. With the wrong decision makers in place, wrong decisions will be made and good project managers will not stick around to experience the next unsuccessful project.

Finally, a major talent management mistake many companies make is an over dependency on external consultants. This can often inhibit the potential of internal project management talent by failing to recognise and develop existing talent. Conversely, some organisations

give their homegrown project manager talent too much when it could be shouldered by external consultants.

## **The generation game**

Organisations can benefit from the variety of skills - sets brought by different generations of project managers. An older, project manager can bring the benefit of experience but that is often accompanied by bad habits and a lack of flexibility when it comes to taking on new ideas. In contrast the younger generation of project managers are open to new ideas and applying Best Practice but they lack the depth of experience to implement new ideas successfully every time or the confidence to apply Best Practice learning and challenge senior management decisions to achieve that when necessary.

As millennial workers enter the workforce organisations seeking to nurture the next generation of project managers would do well to consider the different working styles of this new digital generation who will not be keen to be stranded behind a desktop PC in a conventional office all day. This generation might respond well to training adapted to them – for example gamification. With the right mix of training for the older generation and coaching for the younger generation, organisations can benefit from the skills of all their project managers.

There are practical steps organisations can take to boost project manager talent management:

1. **Engage your project managers.** If project managers feel engaged with the organisation and the company is meeting their needs they are much more likely to stay. Just as the best project managers are those who have a clear picture of what motivates their team, the most effective organisations are those that understand what inspires and engages their project managers.
2. **Sell your organisation.** Potential project manager recruits worth their salt will have multiple job offers. Combine a competitive package with a clear representation of your company activities and culture. Potential project managers are not interested in any old project; they are looking for a market sector, a corporate culture and a project that will interest them. Organisations need to be very clear about who they are so that the right candidates are attracted to them.
3. **Recruit intelligently.** It is important to take a strategic view of recruitment and not just recruit to fill gaps when people leave. It may be right for the organisation to feed in permanent staff at a junior level, hire top level stars, or to use interim consultants who can help with knowledge transfer. The key is to carry out a skills audit and identify the skills already in place and any gaps, before deciding how best to plug the gaps.

4. **Prioritise soft skills during recruitment.** If a candidate seems to have good soft skills but lacks an element of technical expertise they can be trained up in that more easily than developing people skills.
5. **Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is key.** Either through training or coaching and mentoring. Relevant and timely development activities will help keep project managers engaged as well as performing at their best for the benefit of the organisation. Appraisal processes are extremely valuable to help businesses retain their best project managers and should not be the tick box exercises they all too often are.

Organisations that are successful in putting these five tips into practice will be well placed to recruit, develop and retain the brightest and best project managers in an increasingly competitive world.

## References

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.berstein.com/blog/post/Predictions-for-2015--Redesigning-the-Organization-for-A-Rapidly-Changing-World.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> "Dice Tech Salary Survey Results – 2014," <http://resources.dice.com/report/dice-tech-salary-survey-results-2014/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.computerworld.com/article/2844020/10-hottest-it-skills-for-2015.html>

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