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Fostering Collaboration with an Empowered
Technical Program Manager
by Dharma V. Mehta

Fostering Collaboration with an Empowered Technical Program Manager[1]

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Employing technical program managers (TPMs) has become one of the more recent trends in the technology industry. A recent review of LinkedIn job posts finds that nearly 10,000 TPM positions are available in the United States, including opportunities within such major companies as Amazon, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Netflix, Apple, Airbnb, Lyft, Uber, and Intel. The increase in demand for TPMs stems from a need to employ individuals who are capable of managing and delivering on complex projects that involve multiple stakeholders. While the goal seems clear and straightforward, there is an interesting irony. And that is, there is a lack of consistency in how the job is defined and therefore implemented. In some cases, hiring managers don't really know what to expect from TPMs, which can result in biases that affect job performance. Add to that discussion the conversation about the degree of which hands-on technical skills are required, and the debate rages on. While it's true that TPMs should possess a background in technology, this skill is not sufficient to effectively staff this role. An ability to collaborate with multiple stakeholders, to lead others without reliance on authority, and to make reasoned business decisions that are supported by those throughout an organization are much more important qualities for TPMs to exhibit.

Defining the role of the TPM

The role of the TPM is to be responsible for ensuring that projects and programs remain on schedule and that all stakeholders are able to prioritize the work in order to meet deadlines and deliver on customer satisfaction. As a baseline, qualified TPM candidates need to:

- Display a business acumen that is customer centric and strategic
- Demonstrate an ability to solve problems
- Influence others in different departments to remain aligned for a common goal
- Have organizational skills that lend to end to end project management
- Be well versed in proactive risk management
- Understand core concepts in technology software and/or hardware (including architecture design, that is required to complete jobs and tasks.)

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The TPM will be responsible for coordination across diverse teams—for example, a customer interface for a new website that allows for product reviews. For this type of project to succeed, the TPM must be able to evaluate the end-to-end technical design and user functioning, to question the validity of potential problems related to design and/or functionality, and to determine the appropriate delegation of staff members and their responsibilities, such as back-end engineers, web developers, and testers. If and when complications arise, it is important for the TPM to be empowered to rank problems based on importance and severity and to understand which issues are most technically difficult to solve so that solutions can be accomplished and further problems can be mitigated. True, the TPM may not know from an engineering standpoint about how a feature is coded in a specific technical language, but she/he should know what the customer should see and how to bring that to fruition. Additionally, it is important for TPMs to know technical details because they might need to speak with engineers, data scientists, or engineering managers and need to understand their "language." To add fuel to the fire, at any given point, the TPM could be the youngest person in the room. Communicating what must be done to a room full of professionals who are 10-15 years their senior can be intimidating, but ideally, the TPM is the type of person who does not need to rely on aggressive language to achieve consensus and accomplish goals.

In this sense, the TPM can be viewed as an orchestrator, where alignment and collaboration are essential—especially in instances when there's been an integration of companies and products and/or services, as well as staff. When issues arise, the successful TPM needs the foresight and knowhow to be able to diagnose or anticipate the problem, ask the appropriate questions regarding consumer impact and financial implications, and help departments to work together on finding the right solutions.

Do's and Don'ts

Empowered TPMs, just as with any empowered employee, are individuals who have a clearly defined job description that best utilizes their skillset, experience, and education. The employed TPM should not be responsible for only scheduling meetings among different departments. This is an administrative task better suited for an executive assistant. Nor should the TPM be asked to examine HTML code on their own to de-bug website issues. It's fair to think that the TPM should be able to discuss design architecture, but it is not realistic to ask the TPM to design a website or phone app.

Too often, the TPM role is confused with the roles among the likes of project/engineering managers and business analysts. Different managers within the same organizations have different interpretations of the TPM's responsibilities and purpose. While bigger companies tend to have

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more standardized approaches and general expectations for their TPMs, those organizations for which the TPM concept is new and have yet to staff many people in the role are more likely to develop a TPM job description that is not motivating enough long term. Making matters more difficult is a lack of structured, accurate, consistent information and data available regarding the TPM when conducting general online searches.

The consequences to the inconsistency in scope of defining the TPM role are numerous and varied. They include negative impacts on employee relations and the ability to work in a collaborative environment, which is the lifeblood of any productive venture. A study by Stanford University reveals that one's motivation increases when working together, even when physically apart, a key consideration with many working environments stationed remotely due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Due to COVID-19, the requirements of the TPM job has increased and, as such, TPMs can add more value because of their primary responsibility to keep all constituents aligned across many diverse teams. Conversations that were once happening in hallways are now likely happening via Zoom and other online platforms as companies continue to navigate if and when "non-essential" employees can return to the workspace. Until more people return to the workspace, companies must rely on collaboration to occur without the benefit of working together "in person." – something TPMs are very good doing.

The right people with the right skill sets

The existence of the TPM role is becoming more common among organizations of all sizes, and employers are seemingly paying these professionals well. But the average reported salaries, according to LinkedIn, Glassdoor, and Indeed are not consistent, which further reflects that the function of the job is not standardized or widely understood. As more companies begin to employ TPM professionals, it is their responsibility to better understand the intention of this role and to empower employees for the benefit not just of the TPMs themselves, but for their colleagues and companies as a whole. Today's employers need to encourage their TPMs to make continuing education an ongoing aspect of their career goals. Certifications in leadership and management, technical project management, and program management, as well as participation in industry-related forums and conferences, should benefit all parties and position TPMs to be working to their full potential.

Hiring managers who prioritize interpersonal skills and leadership qualities over "simplifying" the TPM role by focusing mainly on deep technical skills will experience more successful business relations and better outcomes. When companies equip the right people with the right skill sets with the right job descriptions, efficiency and effectiveness increase. Without consistency in how TPMs are defined and compensated, however, the role of these professionals cannot fully evolve.

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Dharma Mehta, Director of Program Management at Roku, has 10+ years of professional experience at prestigious companies including Amazon, PayPal and Accenture, solving complex processes and technology problems with simplified solutions. He has expertise in the fields of technology portfolio/ program/ project management, driving software product development, advertising technology and platform business, strategic planning, building high performance teams, and transforming software experience for developers and end customers. He is particularly effective at optimizing performance of people, processes, and technology to deliver improved business outcomes. For more information call 408-987-1794 or email dharmamehta@gmail.com.