

THE ROLE OF A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE IN PROFESSIONAL PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. *Project management is now recognised as a profession, with both academic and professional status. Globally, good project managers are now acknowledged as highly skilled experts in high demand within the workplace.*

Project management (stand alone or within the context of a management role, or wider programme / portfolio management), now encompasses a large range of knowledge, tools, techniques and best practice on how to manage change.

With change now a constant in virtually all aspects of life the need to manage it in a highly effective manner continues to grow. Concurrent with the need for effective management processes and procedures is the growth in the number of people needing the knowledge and ability to manage change, either as a full time profession or as a fundamental part of their working lives.

, professional knowledge and experience, along with formal accreditation and recognition. This paper explores the role for a 'centre of excellence' in the development of professional project management and in the provision of continuous professional development for project managers and others. It explores how such a centre needs to encompass research and development, training and continuous professional development

The paper also goes on to discuss why a higher education institution, as a guardian of knowledge and education, is ideally placed to provide this extending its expertise beyond pure academia.

Finally there is an outline of how Coventry University, in association with other professional bodies, is meeting this challenge by establishing a Centre for Project Excellence.

1 INTRODUCTION

Project management continues to grow as a practice and as a profession. This growth is in response to the ever increasing demand for change, more rapidly implemented and therefore projects to manage it.

As well as a growth in the requirements for project managers as a full time role, there is also an increase in the 'accidental project manager'. This is the manager and leader from across an organisation who has to carry out some change and uses project management as part of the wider scope of their job. There is also an increase in those who have to deal directly with project areas that will impact them by their delivery of change.

An indication of the scale of this growth is given on the US based Project Management Institute's (PMI) web site which states (*June 2010*) that:

'In the Persian Gulf and China Sea regions alone — where entire cities are being built, seemingly overnight — a shortage of 6 million skilled project professionals is expected by 2013. Add to that the fact that, of the 20 million people participating in projects worldwide, just one million have professionally recognized formal training on how to best execute those projects. One thing becomes clear: The demand for skilled project managers is at a critically urgent level.' (PMI 2010)¹

The size of the PMI itself, with half a million members and credential holders in 185 countries, also provides some indication of the numbers of people who see project management as a profession and want to be linked to a professional body. The UK based Association for Project Management (APM) currently has 17,500 individual and 500 corporate members throughout the UK and abroad, and is seeking to achieve Chartered status - again recognising the drive for positioning this particular aspect of management as a profession.

But it is not just about volumes. There is also a need for people to be able to deliver to an increasingly high quality and more efficiently. This means learning from their own and other people's experience, being able to put into practice the most effective tools and techniques, so refining and improving ways of managing projects. This continuous improvement becomes the continuous professional development (CPD) route of individual project managers.

Even outside of project management programmes, most management training and development now includes elements of project management, change management and / or risk management.

2 A WIDE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE, SYSTEMS AND TRAINING TO USE AND BUILD UPON

The experience of most project managers is that their skill and expertise is based on a broad base of project management skills and knowledge, qualifications and practical experience, combined with general management and leadership skills. All this is set in the context of specific sector knowledge and expertise. These wider management skills and abilities are often seen as of greater importance than specific project skills.

Education, and related academic qualifications, are increasingly becoming the norm for project management professionals. This is highlighted this year in a review of project professionals by Arras People, the project management recruitment consultancy:

'As "degree level education" and "second degree level" become more prevalent in specifications for PPM (project and programme management) roles,

..... there is certainly no shortage of educated people in the community with 63% at degree level, rising to 83% in the under 34's. The data also shows a historical perspective of where "project management" came from, with the 50+ age group having more vocational and HND/HNC level respondents which has fallen off over the years..' (Arras People 2010)²

If project professionals are looking to develop academically there is a large choice of universities, and other bodies, offering degrees and masters degrees in generic and specialist project management areas, including construction. For instance if you Google 'project management university degrees in the UK' you get 2.2 million hits.

But it's not just academic qualifications that are becoming more important. In a recent article published on the PMI UK Chapters web site, Dianne Middleton from the Wall Street Journal, highlighted the growing demand for 'evidence' in the form of training certificates gained by project management professionals;

'Companies say the certifications are proof that their current or prospective employees meet an industry-wide standard. And, some companies say a growing number of their clients insist on dealing only with employees who have earned industry designations.'

The Project Management Institute says it has seen a 30% jump in registration for its handful of certifications. The most popular is the Project Management Professional certification for experienced managers, while the fastest-growing is the Certified Associate in Project Management, which prepares nonmanagers to be part of a project-management team, according to the nonprofit professional association.' (Middleton 2010)³

Whilst the relevance of such qualifications may be the subject of some discussion in project circles, there is clearly a desire from employers and project sponsors for some sort of 'badge' of ability. This is clearly evidenced in the number of job adverts which call for PMI, Prince2, APM or other evidence of professional project management achievement; supported by the growing number of training companies and universities who are willing to provide them. If you Google 'project management training in the UK' (June 2010) you get 10.4 million hits, with page after page of companies offering various training courses.

In the view of Arras People;

'Today we have a plethora of training courses which provide / test "Technical Knowledge", some even offer guaranteed success and entry in to the field of Programme and Project management...'

The report goes on to point out that some project managers refuse to do these qualifications, which they merely regard as "badges". They think that they do not fully reflect their abilities and experience. It states;

'Overall we believe the current situation is not good enough, the pendulum has swung too far and the curriculum is too narrow. Prince2®, PMBok, M_o_R®, MSP™ etc. have their place, but we need to recognise the breadth of knowledge and experience required to make effective practitioners both today and for the future!' (Arras People 2010)²

There is no doubt that in order to develop effective project managers and others with the associated disciplines, there is a requirement for a much wider range of development routes.

Respondents to the Arras People report also highlighted a range of core competencies required by project managers beyond project skills. These majored on leadership, planning and organising, relationship management, communication skills, commercial awareness and influencing.

For individuals there will also be additional personal development needs, or specific areas of knowledge development, for example lean management techniques, or human resource policy. This means that in addition to formal education and training there is also a need for specific CPD and self development.

Often this development is about experiential learning and reflection. Research, learning logs, access to experienced people, networks, learning sets and access to structured information amongst other tools and techniques can all support such development.

3 A ROLE FOR UNIVERSITIES

In a recent article in the APMs Project magazine, I expressed the view that a university is ideally placed to provide the wider range of development routes.

'Broadly speaking a university is a place which provides a depth of education on a subject, over a long period of time, supported by research into specific aspects of the subject. Conversely commercial learning and development focuses on developing abilities that can be applied directly to specific areas of work to achieve performance improvements.

With the drive to ensure new graduates are more fit for the 'real world' of work, and for universities to work closer with businesses and other organisations, now seems like the right time to bring together the depth of academia together with the more practical requirements of the working environment.' (Bennett 2010)⁴

As an educational institution a university is able to take the longer and broader view in terms of development whether at a subject, organisational or individual level. This can encompass academic courses running over months or years, dissertations, resources allowing self development, group engagement in problem solving and solution development and applied research.

The ability, in fact the requirement, of a university to work this way, puts it in a different position to training companies, and even in house training programmes. These tend to have a different driver to up skill and train people in a much shorter and more focused way. Additionally a university can also run the professional 'badge' courses, often putting them in the wider context of academic teaching and applied research.

The challenge for universities is to become better at combining all these elements together, keeping its depth of expertise and research, whilst moving away from an 'ivory tower' perception and becoming seen as more practical and able to relate its expertise to the 'coal face' of real change management.

A university needs to filter its breadth of knowledge, producing highly focused development when required by organisations, using the range of its academic expertise.

One way of putting all this together leads to the idea of a centre of excellence.

4 WHAT IS A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE?

Within the project community there already exists the idea of a centre of excellence. For example within PRINCE2 there is the following definition:

'The concept of a centre of excellence is that of a central standards unit, which defines standards (such as processes, templates and tools), and provides skills, training and possibly independent assurance functions to a number of projects.' (OGC 2009)⁵

This definition throws up some potential comparisons with a university as a centre which through its expertise '*defines standards*', educates and so '*provides skills, training*' and through research comes up with '*independent assurance*'.

The Office of Government Commerce defines this further in its Centre of Excellence Pocket book. Whilst this refers to a centre within an organisation or department, some of the principles of such a centre and the outcomes it is seeking to achieve can be applied to a centre which is more generic, sitting outside of any organisation; in fact this potentially could have advantages in the degree of independence and breadth of approaches and best practise it could draw on.

'A Centre of Excellence (COE) for programme and project management (PPM) is a coordinating function providing strategic oversight, scrutiny and challenge across the department's portfolio of programmes and projects. A COE is the focal point for supporting the department's individual programmes and projects, and for driving the implementation of improvements to increase the department's capacity in programme and project delivery.' (OGC 2006)⁶

5 COVENTRY UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR PROJECT EXCELLENCE

With the development of its Centre for Project Excellence, Coventry University is seeking to provide a complete development centre for aspiring project managers, established professional project managers, and managers and leaders who see project management as part of their wider role. It will also meet the needs of organisations who are looking for a provider who can encompass the breadth and depth of expertise required as change and projects become increasingly a part of modern life.

In designing its centre Coventry has initially focused on five core dimensions: academic education, professional development, bespoke development, research and provision of a reference library.

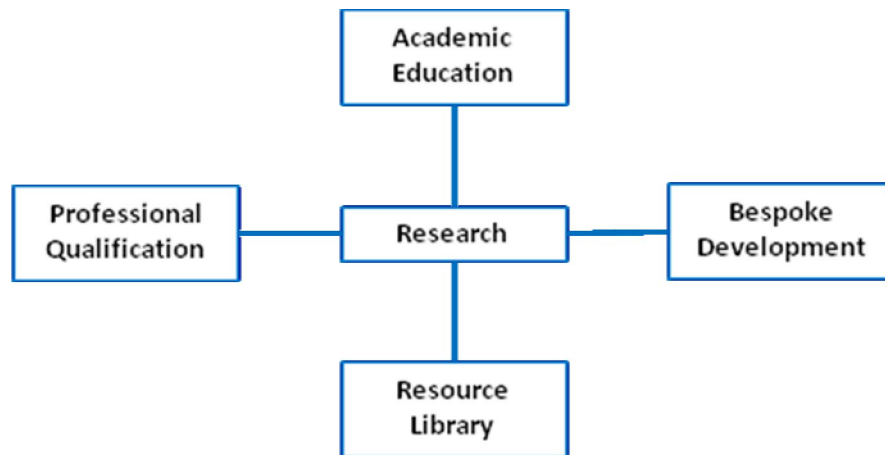


Figure 1: The initial focus of the Centre for Project Excellence.

5.1 Academic Education

This is the traditional focus of a university, providing a depth of knowledge and individual research beyond that generally required in day to day project management execution. This depth is essential if project management practice is to increase in its effectiveness and efficiency. On the premise that doing what you have always done gets you the results you have always got, linked with the continued shortfall in project delivery experienced in most sectors, then the requirement for development of new methods and increasing depth of expertise is clear. This is the aspect that moves people from the journeyman to the master craftsman.

Such provision, separate from the daily application, allows development to take place across various sectors and brings together a range of approaches without being enclosed within a specific methodology, scoped body of knowledge or a delivery requirement.

A university can also provide a consistent quality measure by placing a structure around the learning, and awarding recognised levels of qualification - degree, masters, doctorate etc.

The potential downside is that it can become too academic in an area of development which requires rapid outcomes and results. There can also be a perception from project management practitioners that depth of theory and academic study is of limited value in the 'real world' of day to day project and programme management.

Any centre claiming excellence needs therefore to blend this with other key elements.

5.2 Professional Development

This provides the counter balance to the education dimension. Learning and development here is about application, developing skills and competencies that can be applied directly to any project in a consistent way, very much focused on the 'sharp end'.

There are a range of recognised professional qualifications, all geared into a more practitioner rather than academic expertise. Generally development falls into two camps, with overlaps within and across them.

There is the methodology based development, for example becoming a Prince2 practitioner, or a DSDM practitioner. These are built around specific methods with associated tools and techniques and give those who use them a clear structured way to approach project management, along with a shared language and often professional network.

The second approach is that of a body of knowledge, such as APM or IPM's PMBoK. With these there are a defined set of areas that the project professional is expected to understand and be able to apply. This provides for a wider scope generally than the methodology route and is usually less prescriptive on tools and techniques.

The two approaches can often come together, for instance in the APM Body of Knowledge being seen as providing supporting tools and techniques and a wider context which can be used by a Prince2 Practitioner; a practitioner can even use qualifications in one to fast track to the other.

5.3 Bespoke Development

Large organisations often have their own systems and ways of managing projects. Other organisations don't want to follow an externally prescribed approach. Others again need an approach geared to specifics of their businesses, or to fit in with the larger organisational approach.

In these and other situations organisations may well require bespoke development, working with their own systems and circumstances. There may even be a requirement to construct a system based upon some specific research and analysis of their circumstances.

A bespoke solution starts with development staff experienced in running projects and programmes. To this is added a knowledge store of different approaches, systems, tools and techniques. With a centre accredited to teach a range of professional systems, these could also be used within a solution. Whilst the whole is supported with existing or new research, and can potentially use the network that a university can establish.

Finally the bespoke solution could take the form of a short training module, a self development programme, a full academic programme taking place over years or access to resources to enable a CPD programme to be put in place.

A university has a unique opportunity amongst training and development organisations to do all this, providing it can expand its range to include the more pragmatic and bespoke solutions organisations often call for.

5.4 Research

As a centre of excellence research into ways to manage projects and programmes, with subsequent publication and application of results, should be a core part of driving standards and challenging existing methods. Here a university should clearly distinguish itself from other types of development organisation.

In essence research should be encompassed within the centre in three ways;

- as applied research and publication as part of the remit of being a university, and a specialist in a subject area.
- as part of the development of bespoke solutions for organisations; part of the consultancy process.
- as part of academic courses of study in which students will be researching areas for their course work and dissertations.

In turn outcomes from research will feed back into other aspects of the centre, building knowledge and expertise.

5.5 Reference Library

This final area in the initial set up of the centre is about providing a range of data sources including the university library and associated information, at a central point. Living in an age of information excess, filtering and sorting such information can often be a time consuming challenge.

So this provision is also about developing the ability for individuals to search, access and evaluate a range of information sources - academic and professional. Again this is clearly a core part of what a university does in the wider context, whilst at the same time being a central part of what a centre providing excellence in a subject needs to provide.

In turn this becomes part of the synergistic way in which all five areas combine by providing the store of information that underpins the other aspects and allows development and research to flourish.

6 WHAT NEXT?

Staying focused on the initial five areas and developing high levels of expertise could provide enough for the centre to focus on for some time. However, it would be hard to claim to be developing a centre of excellence if it was not continuously seeking to improve and develop itself.

So what thoughts for future scope? These are some potential thoughts at this stage.

6.1 Green Projects

From the Arras People report there appears to be a growing trend to green projects:

The survey shows that the “greening of projects” is seen by many PPM practitioners as a compliance issue which will add complexity, cost and time to their programmes and

projects. Whilst many respondents are making changes to reduce consumption of resources such as paper and petrol there is generally not a clear understanding of what “green” will mean. ’

and in terms of green issues is projects:

‘The vast majority in all cuts of the data were firmly in the “somewhat concerned” grouping that averaged around the 50% mark. At the extremes the “very concerned” was also a consistent cut across all groupings at 26% of all respondents except for the Charity / NFP sector which rose to 43%.’ (Arras People 2010)²

This could provide an ideal area for research and the development of new tools and techniques. It could also focus a special interest group.

6.2 A Foundation Degree

This could seek to provide the depth of study of a foundation degree, utilising high quality academic education and research techniques, whilst at the same time enabling students to complete professional APM, Prince2 and Management of Risk qualifications. As a foundation degree this would be set in the context of work, so allowing immediate application and reflection into the 'real world'.

6.3 Networks and Action Learning Sets

This could focus on bringing people together, in both virtual and real world situations, to work on developing potential solutions to real issues, using this as a vehicle for self development. These could also take the form, for instance, of combined research projects developing new tools and techniques.

6.4 Master classes

This would be a series of short, specialist events dealing with very specific aspects of project management, and how to maximise your current knowledge and expertise. These could range from self development packages to workshops.

6.5 On-line development modules

Potentially self study units which could be used either as part of on-going CPD or accessed as and when needed to hone certain areas. They could also be developed as group resources, maybe specific to an organisation or sector.

Clearly there are a large number of areas which could be developed. Key to the success and effectiveness of the centre will be its ability to respond to the needs of its clients as they also change in the future.

7 CONCLUSION

There is a large and growing demand for expertise in managing projects and delivering change. The management of change is set to become increasingly the norm for most of us.

Building expertise in this area requires a mixture of professional development, education, experience and self development. A university is the ideal place to provide this mixture. To do so it needs to start from its role as a centre of learning, and then become more aligned to the needs of business and organisations. It then needs to build its ability to blend in professional development.

Coventry through its inception of a Centre for Project Excellence is seeking to respond to this need. It is clear that, as with all else in modern life, how it does this will change over time.

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