



The evolution of project management

by Prof Herman Steyn

Project managers have been known as prima donnas – dynamic, assertive people who understood the art of sticking to tight schedules and budgets. While projects still attract energetic people who like challenges and diverse work experiences, the prima donna status of project managers is gradually changing; their role is being demystified as project management becomes an established vocation and as companies increasingly develop standardised methodologies for managing projects.

When the term ‘project management’ was coined in the 1950s, the emphasis was entirely on scheduling, budgeting and control. In 1981, when, as a young engineering manager, I first studied project management at the University of Pretoria, the emphasis was still to a large extent on scheduling, budgeting, control and project information systems (that ran on mainframe computers).

While scheduling, cost estimation and control remain crucially important, project management has been redefined to include subject matter from a wide range of fields such as operations management, systems thinking, new product development, risk management, the quality movement, organisational dynamics, industrial psychology and various other aspects of commercial management. In the 1990s, the University of Pretoria realised that, as a large, multidisciplinary institution, it was excellently positioned to teach the multidisciplinary field of project management and also to contribute towards its development by means of research. This has led to the University of Pretoria being the first (and so far the only) university on the African continent with a master’s programme in project management accredited by the USA Project Management Institute (PMI).

In the highly specialised modern world, project management is normally a second field of interest. The finest project managers all specialise in managing projects in a specific field (such as construction, new product development, social work or IT – often the project manager’s first field of study).

While most of the continuing education in project management at the University of Pretoria is suitable to people from all disciplines, the master’s degree programme is aimed specifically at engineers and scientists.

In the early days of project management, the focus was on the planning and execution of an individual project. One current emphasis is on linking multiple projects with corporate strategies to enhance corporate competitiveness. This has led to projects being viewed as investments that form part of portfolios of projects. Organisations handling multiple projects need to make complex decisions to structure portfolios and to allocate resources to the individual projects, based on several criteria that include the strategic relevance and relative priority of each project. Computer systems have become essential in supporting these decisions. Despite some excellent developments in IT systems, software alone does not provide the ultimate answer to managing multiple projects – people skilled in the science and art of project management will always be required to make decisions.

With project management firmly established as a way of improving competitiveness, and with a vibrant interest of corporations in the field, qualifications in project management have become highly valued investments. 📌

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