Can Anybody be a Project Manager?

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Opening remarks

Can anybody be a project manager?   The easy answer is yes, everyone can be a project manager, and probably already is: everyone uses project management skills in their day-to-day personal and working life as they are doing 'projects' all the time.

The more pertinent question is, if everyone can be an effective project manager, and do they require a different set of skills to manage projects? To answer the question, it is important to understand what a project is and in so doing better understand what project managers are required to do, their required skill sets and knowledge attributes.

The objective of project management is to complete projects which comply with the client's business objectives. According to the PMI PMBOK® Guide (PMI, 2017) a project is "a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result". A project is thus temporary in that it has a defined start and finish date, and therefore defined scope and resources (including cost). A project is unique in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal. Project teams often include people who don't usually work together, people from different organisations and across multiple geographies, bringing their own systems, cultures and aspirations.

Projects and project management

Examples of projects can include the development of software for an improved business process, the construction of a building or bridge, the relief effort after a natural disaster, the expansion of sales into a new geographic market, and the establishment of a new petrochemical complex. This stands in contrast with business as usual (or operations), which are repetitive, permanent, or semi-permanent functional activities to produce products or services.

Project management then, is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet specific project requirements. Projects must be expertly

managed to deliver results on-time and on-budget, with minimal or no scope changes, whilst still meeting the original strategic intent or business need.

Many tend to think of project management as a new approach for growth and development. However, project management has been around for thousands of years and was involved in the planning, coordination, and construction of the Ancient Wonders of the World. Throughout the history of project management, the basic principles of project management have always remained the same. In the late 19th century, the need for more structure in the construction, manufacturing, and transportation sectors gave rise to the modern project management tactics we use today. However, it must be remembered that although project management has always been practiced informally, it only began to emerge as a distinct profession in the mid-20th century.

In today's fast-paced business world, the need for effective project management has become a necessity rather than a luxury. Any formal project, unlike a random set of tasks, requires professional management, and implies teamwork and accountability to finish on time, on budget, and meet quality requirements. Therefore, we have at least two essential roles: the people doing the actual project work and delivering the required outcomes, the team members, and the person directing and leading the project work whilst ensuring that management goals are met, the project manager.

The project manager function

Though specific responsibilities vary depending on industry and project type, a project manager is broadly defined as someone who leads the larger-scale projects, doing everything from ensuring clarity around the scope of work, to onboarding and educating other individuals essential to the project, to project coordination, managing the timelines, scope and budgets associated with the undertaking.

Project managers work closely with individuals of different organisations, ranks, departments and stakeholders, thereby ensuring effective planning, coordinating the efficient and flow of information among all project stakeholders. Depending on the industry and organisational structure, projects managers may either focus on a single project at a time or manage multiple projects with their respective timelines and responsibilities.

As you can probably tell by the description, this role is essential in nearly all industries and fields of work, meaning the actual types of projects managed can take nearly any shape and form. Most project managers, however, choose to specialise in a specific industry to ensure they're equipped to handle its unique challenges.

The job of a project manager includes three broad areas:

- Assuming responsibility for the project as a whole;

- Employing relevant project management processes; and

- Leading the team.

Skills required

To understand what an effective project manager is, we need to unpack the skills and attributes of a project manager. The key and most important skills required to be an effective project manager are:

- **Strong leadership**: Effective project management means having strong leadership qualities such as being able to motivate the team and other stakeholders and lead /direct them to maximum performance, so that they can achieve challenging project goals;

- **Competence:** Good project managers can initiate new projects as well as face the challenges that come with it. They follow a formal stage-gated process and are fully competent with the requirements of all project steps during the different project stages;

- **Project management technical expertise:** Since project management software systems, procedures and other related programs are essential in accomplishing the project goals, an effective project manager needs to have sound technical project management knowledge to understand the issues that are related to the technical aspect. You need good processes and project systems to be effective as your projects get larger;

- **Communication skills:** Good project managers are good communicators so that they can connect with people at all levels inside or outside their organisation. The project manager must clearly explain the project goals as well as each member's tasks, responsibilities, expectations and feedback. By some estimates, more than 50% of a project manager's time is spent in some aspect of communication. This includes meetings, status reporting, emails, phone calls, coordinating, talking to people, and completing documentation. Some studies have even suggested that verbal and written communication takes up 80% of the job;

- **People and team-building skills:** It is necessary that a team works in unison, otherwise the project will undergo various relationship challenges that might hinder its success. Project managers must make each of their team members realise the importance of their contribution and focus on their positive traits. He must be fair and just in the way he treats team members. If you prefer to stay in your office and focus on your own work, you may not have the collaborative ability to be a good project manager. Effective project managers need to spend a lot of time with clients, stakeholders, and team members;

- **Decision-making skills**: An effective project manager needs to have decision-making skills because there will always be decisions that need to be acted on, often with time constraints;

- **Coordination and delegation skills**: Many people like to work on the project details. We need people like that. But when you're a project manager, you must rise above the details and become more of a delegator and coordinator. You must be able to rely on others for much of the detailed work, but must still be able to do the mundane and detail work when required;

- **People management skills:** To be a good project manager, you need to be able to manage people. You won't have 100% responsibility for staff members, but you will need to show leadership, hold them accountable, manage conflict, etc. Some project managers say they could do a much better job if they didn't have to deal with people. If that's how you feel, project management is probably not for you;

- **Planning and execution skills:** When a client gives you a project, what is your immediate inclination? If your first thought is to get a team together to start executing the work, you may not have a project management mindset. If you don't want to spend enough time to be sure you understand what is required, and what is the best approach to achieve results, the role of project manager is likely a bad fit for you;

- **Organising skills:** People who have poor personal organisational skills and techniques usually don't make good project managers. If you're going to manage multiple people over a period, you must be organised, so you can ensure that everyone is doing what they should be doing as efficiently as possible; and

- **Reporting skills:** You don't have to love reporting status and progress to be a good project manager, but you can't hate it either. Most, if not all, aspects of project management require extensive documentation and document control, including project charters, execution plans, status reporting, communication plans and scope change management.

The process of becoming a project manager is unique because there isn't one single prescribed path to becoming one. Some decide they want to be a project manager and take classes and get a project management qualification, while others, with unrelated degrees or experience, find themselves taking on the responsibilities of a project manager with no formal project management training.

Attributes required

Over and above skills which can be learned, developed and improved, effective project managers require specific inherent attributes. Here are some attributes of good project managers:

- **Get to know their team and how they work:** Understand that a project isn't about the project manager. He understands that knowing how to communicate with the project team and establishing a system that works for everyone is crucial to the project's success. With a structure that accommodates the team, he gets everyone on board to focus on what's important;

- **Inspire a shared vision:** An effective project manager understands the project's vision very well and can articulate the vision to his team members and other stakeholders. A visionary person can lead his people to the right direction as well as easily adapt to the changes that come along the way. They are good at enabling people to experience the vision as their own;

- **Keep stakeholders in the loop:** The project manager continuously communicates with all stakeholders verbally and in writing. He looks forward to coordination sessions with his team to talk about what's happening, what has been accomplished, and what steps to take next;

- **Identify and establish parameters:** The project manager makes sure that everyone understands the project objectives and works within the agreed and approved scope of the project. This way, he can set reasonable expectations, feasible tasks and goals;

- **Present and prepared for anything:** As deadlines approach, the project manager checks in regularly to see if the team will be able to deliver on time and if there are questions or problems that need to be addressed. He is ready to deal with the pressure of delivering on time, even if it means realising mistakes have been made, and doing everything possible to correct them;

- **Confidently speak on behalf of the team:** Clients will want the project manager on the phone or at a meeting at any time to discuss progress, updates, and changes that need to be made. Because the project has a well-defined scope and the project manager has checked in with his team on a regular basis, he will be able to take those calls or attend client meetings with the relevant information to share;

- **Not easily swayed:** A client, partner, or team member may approach and present the project manager or team members with new ideas, requirements, or questions. The project manager needs to be open to hearing these new ideas, but make sure to keep in mind the original scope of work and project requirements. If they align or improve on the original scope in terms of safety performance, he is willing to discuss things further. If not, he is not afraid to turn down those ideas and present valid reasons for doing so;

- **Seek out and consult with subject matter experts:** Effective project managers know their own limitations. They know that when clients have specific concerns, to seek out knowledgeable people and consult with them. The project manager thereby acknowledges that, with their level of experience and knowledge, the subject matter experts are the best people to answer those questions; and

- **Encourage and congratulate others for a job well done:** The role as a project manager goes beyond monitoring progress and checking in on deadlines. He "owns and supports the process" of putting together and bringing the project to fruition. He cheers his team members on and congratulates them for every successful milestone achieved, yet at the same time he is not afraid to ask questions or raise issues that he may anticipate.

Thus, project management is far more than just management. If you haven't already guessed it, these attributes show that project management isn't solely about managerial skills and know-how.

Comparing Project Management and General Management

There are strong views that any good general/operational/technical manager will always be a good project manager and vice versa. This is not true, and it is a rarity for a person to have the skills and attributes to be able to effectively manage both types of work.

A general/operational/technical manager has a wider scope of responsibility than the project manager, and the operations/technical role is permanent while the project manager role is temporary. Operational management is an ongoing function in an organisation that performs activities that produce products or services. Operations are ongoing; some examples include accounting and human resources. An organisation needs those roles no matter what initiative(s) they may be working on.

The very fact that the role of a project manager is temporary implies that a project team is basically a 'short-term' association. In a fixed operations/technical management team, the team members report directly to the manager who leads that team and those member roles in the team will generally be long-term. The manager is responsible for creating good team work and setting the norms and behaviours of the team. He/she needs to build trust and respect in the team, encourage the sharing of information, opinions and feelings for the benefit of the team, and set targets to appraise the performance of the team members.

A project team will consist of people from different departments across different sites of the organisation and/or contracting establishments. Sometimes, project team members may still report to their functional departmental manager, as well as reporting to the project manager. As the priorities of the other departmental managers change, the project team's stability can waver, but it should never compromise the project outcomes. Where team member report to more than one manager, appraisal of his or her work may pose problems. Here the project manager needs to find the right balance between constructive team building initiatives with an emphasis on open and honest communication.

The skills needed by the project manager are different to those needed by operational managers. General differences between general/operational/technical management and project management are shown in Table 1. Simply put, project management is unique and highly planned, yet unpredictable. The principal difference between project management and operational management is that the project manager has a temporary role, which leads to some specific differences and difficulty in the case of team building effort.

Table 1: General/operational/technical management vs. project management

General/Operational/Technical Manager	Project Manager
• Role does not end	• Role ends with project completion
• Stable organisation	• Project team is temporary
• Work with direct reports	• Dual reporting lines may apply
• Tasks are routine and predictable	• Projects are unique and unpredictable
• One or more specialist skills	• Many different skills required
• Annual planning cycle	• Time, scope and budget constraints
• Budgets set and fixed events	• Difficult to estimate time and budget

Personality types best suited to project management

What personality type fits best into project management? It will depend largely on the type, scale of the project and the experience of the project team. There are many models used to describe personalities. One of the most prevalent is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2019). Based on the answers to the questions on the questionnaire, people are identified as having one of 16 personality types. The goal of the MBTI is to allow respondents to further explore and understand their own personalities including their likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, possible career preferences, and compatibility with other people.

The questionnaire itself is made up of four different scales, namely:

- **Extraversion – Introversion:** Projects are about people and teams, so good project managers tend to be at least somewhat extroverted. Introverted project managers may find their projects wandering out of control because they are insufficiently engaged with the people responsible for the work;

- **Sensing – Intuition:** A second scale considers the dichotomy between a preference for observable data and a preference for intuitive information. Projects are best managed using measurable facts that can be verified and tested;

- **Thinking – Feeling:** A third scale relates to whether decisions are based on logical objective analysis or on feelings and values. Projects, especially technical projects, proceed most smoothly when decisions are based on consistent, analytical criteria; and

- **Judging – Perceiving:** The fourth MBTI scale is the one most strongly aligned with project management, and it describes how individuals conduct their affairs. On one extreme is the individual who plans and organises what must be done, which

is what project management is mostly about. On the other extreme is the individual who prefers to be spontaneous and flexible. Projects run by these 'free spirits' tend to be chaotic nightmares and may never reach completion.

Project managers need to be 'technical enough'. For small, technical projects, it is common for the project leader to be a highly technical subject matter expert. For larger programs, project managers are seldom masters of every technical detail, but generally they are knowledgeable enough to ensure that communications are clear and that status can be verified. On small, technical projects, the project manager may be a technical guru, but that becomes much less important and often problematic as the work grows. Large-scale projects require an effective leader who can motivate people and delegate the work to those who understand the technical details.

Finally, good project managers are upbeat and optimistic. They always need to be liked (mostly not, however) and trusted by project sponsors and upper management to be successful. They communicate progress honestly, even when a project runs into trouble. Retaining the confidence of your stakeholders in times of trouble also requires communicating credible strategies for recovery. Effective leaders meet challenges with an assumption that there is a solution. With a positive attitude, often, they find one.

Closing remarks

Although the processes of effective project management have only been recognised for around 50 years, project management has been around since the dawn of mankind. From amazing feats of engineering and construction in ancient times to the complex projects we see today, the history of project management is vast, extensive, and ever-growing.

It can clearly be seen that the project manager requires a very wide skills base to be effective, making them more of a generalist than a specialist. Many of these skills cannot be taught and are revealed more naturally in the person. Training will enhance and improve these skills. However, project management is not for everyone. Many people have some of the traits to be a good project manager, but they may also have qualities that make them a bad fit for the position.

Project management, especially for larger projects, is a highly demanding and a time-consuming job. The project manager needs to be skillful and experienced in a wide sphere of the working environment, from very strong leadership, communication and people skills to very strong project and technical skills.

Effective project managers have a lot in common with all good managers. Good project managers are people oriented and will quickly establish effective working relationships with their team members. However, the skills required is very wide ranging and somewhat different from normal management. Project management is definitely not for everybody.

A quote to consider when contemplating this career path is the following by Tom Kendrick (2011): *"Everyone cannot be an effective project manager, and not all project managers will be successful in all types of projects, but if you believe you have the traits described above go for it. It will be very challenging and most times rewarding".*

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