

Tools or talent? The makings of a great project manager are shifting

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Project management is not so much a science as an art, says expert Dennis Comninou, as business turns towards talent over technicians as the differentiator of great project managers.

Until recently a search for a good project manager would focus on what they could do - what they knew about processes and software - the tools that made them competent.

Today that is not enough. What is now increasingly sought is not so much a project manager as a project leader, a person with the instinctive ability to look beyond ticking project boxes, and to apply strategy and business focus.

"In the last 10 to 15 years there has been a focus on skills, software tools and techniques but those are not what make a great project leader," says Dennis Comninou, course convenor of the UCT Graduate School of Business' popular executive course on Project Management and co-author with Enzo Frigenti of the definitive international bestseller, *The Practice of Project Management, A Business Focused Approach*.

In a climate which is highly competitive and fast paced, business is under pressure to produce high-quality, technically innovative products hard and fast with lean organisations and tight budgets. What it takes to succeed in this climate is high performance levels and a focus on strategic and business objectives.

Walter Baets, Director of the UCT Graduate School of Business, says that additionally, business - especially in Africa - is looking for people who can manage projects in conditions of high uncertainty and inequality and are able to drive change towards more inclusive business models.

It is a tall order - and may explain why the failure rate of projects is estimated to be between 40% and 70%. Comninou says this begs the question, why, with all the sophisticated tools and methodologies, are we not succeeding?

"We've got trained certified people out there, but successful project management is not about competence, it's about capability," says Comninou.

It's an approach that has long resonated with Comninou, and it is a project management philosophy that is gaining momentum globally as business moves to apply less emphasis and investment into the mechanical side, and instead to look beyond qualifications and competence to raw talent.

"It is no longer enough to look for a qualified project manager with good people skills and competence with best practice. What you want is someone with the flexibility and insight to focus on business value while driving a project forward. It is a shift from process to value delivery," he says.

It is the differentiator between strategy and action plans, bridging the gap between the boardroom where strategy happens and the coal face where the work is done. What you want is someone who can combine service delivery with big picture thinking, he adds.

"The trick is to find the right people, with the right tools, at the right time. You want to tap into that select group that is truly capable - the gifted bunch," says Comninou.

"You've got to be careful what you look for. Psychometric testing is helpful. Talent is the key and you need to identify it," he

adds.

"If you take someone with the right talent and instincts, you can quickly teach them the process, tools, and techniques required to perform. What has been done in the past is to mechanically teach the tools, processes and techniques and assume that that is all that is required for success. Talent and capability are the keys to success!"

The UCT Graduate School of Business Project Management programme runs from 11 to 14 August 2014 in Cape Town. For more information contact Tracy Kimberley on 021 406 1346 or visit www.gsb.uct.ac.za/projectmanagement.

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