

THE FUTURE OF THE HERO PROJECT MANAGER

Presented at



10 - 12 May 2010
Milan Convention Centre
Milano, Italy

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Abstract

The role of project managers within organizations is changing. During the 1960s and 1970s most project managers were *accidental project managers*: Their careers and qualifications were always in another discipline, and the world was only starting to embrace the concept of projects. From the 1980s through to the start of the twenty-first century, project management became better-defined, better-understood, and better-codified. The certification of project managers has become increasingly common, and the ideal of delivering projects on time and within budget has been recognized. This era has seen the “accidental project manager” change to the “*hero* project manager”— a highly skilled practitioner who can almost single-handedly create project success measured by the *iron triangle* of time, cost, and scope.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, these skills and characteristics will no longer be enough. Good project management will probably be *business as usual*. The project manager will display level 5 leadership, whereby he or she will be attuned to the needs of the team as well as to the power structures of the organization. In addition, the organization’s governance structures will incorporate effective portfolio, program, and project management supported by project management offices (PMOs).

In this environment, project success will increasingly be measured in terms of the value realized by the organization and by stakeholder satisfaction. Rather than the project being an end in itself, it will be seen as part of the organization’s strategic mission, with the key element of success being how well the project’s outputs help the organization achieve its desired outcomes. This paper will briefly outline the evolving role of the project manager over the last 50 years and focus on the emerging skills needed by successful project managers in the new decade as their role changes from that of a hero to that of a business leader.

Introduction

The role of project managers within organizations is forever changing. No one actually considered project management before the 1940s; in the 1960s and 1970s, most project managers were *accidental* project managers: Their careers and qualifications were always in another discipline and the world was only starting to embrace the concept of projects as we now think of them.

From the 1980s through to the start of the twenty-first century, project management became better-defined, better-understood, and better-codified. The certification of project managers became increasingly common, and the ideal of delivering projects on time and within budget was recognized and realized. This era saw the *accidental* project manager change to the *certified* or *competent* project manager.

More recently, trends towards project management becoming a true profession have developed along with the need for project managers to act effectively as leaders of diverse knowledge-creating teams, as “*new age leaders*,” and to be effective partners in the overall strategy of a business, or, “*the business-aware project manager*.”

However, within this steady progression towards a profession that is team-oriented, knowledge-capable, and business-aware, another damaging manifestation has arisen. The effort to create project success measured by the *iron triangle* of time, cost, and scope has also created a focus on the concept of the project manager as *hero*. The *project manager hero* is a highly skilled practitioner who operates almost single-handedly to create project success and who is so focused on the *hard* qualities of project success that there is little time for utilizing the strengths of the team or engaging stakeholders.

This paper is based on the position that, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, this heroic approach to delivering business strategy through projects will become increasingly less effective. Good project management will be more closely allied to a recognition that delivery of *business results* through teamwork and collaboration with a wider community of stakeholders is more important than super-human efforts to stay within budget and schedule. To achieve this, the project manager will need to exhibit *level 5 leadership* attributes (Collins 2001), whereby he or she will be attuned to the needs of the team as well as to the power structures of the organization.

In this environment, project success will increasingly be measured in terms of the value realized by the organization and by the degree of stakeholder satisfaction. Rather than the project being an end in itself, it will be seen as part of the organization's strategic mission with the key measure of success being how well the project's outputs help the organization achieve its desired outcomes.

The distinction between the traditional definition of *projects* as temporary and focussed on delivering a single objective and the *new-age business focus* of modern project management is an important one, and understanding the need for a business focus will be the hallmark of this new age.

This paper will briefly outline the evolving role of the project manager over the last 50 years and the development of the profession of project management. It will then focus on the connection between changes in organization structure and management theory and how these are reflected in changes to the perception of the skills needed by *successful* project managers as their role changes from *accidental project manager* to *competent manager* to *collaborative business leader*.

The first section of this paper will describe the historical perspective of the development of projects and project management skills, disciplines, and practices; the next section describes the origins of modern project management with the "invention" of the critical path method (CPM) and other scheduling techniques, and the development of the *iron triangle*. The influence of project management associations on the standardization of processes and practices and the importance of accreditation to the project management profession will be considered in the third section. The fourth section relates to management and its connection with the skills and knowledge understood as being necessary for leadership roles and describes an additional connection to the evolution of the idea of the *modern project manager*.

A Brief History of Project Practices and Disciplines

The Emergence of "Projects" as an Idea

Projects have existed for as long as people have been setting out to accomplish a specific objective with limited resources. However, until relatively recently, these objectives were not seen, or described, as projects. Only within the last 50 years has the use of the terms *project* and *project management* become common.

One of the earliest business management roles that could be defined as *project management* was the role of Proctor and Gamble's "brand managers" in the mid- to late 1920s. These managers were responsible for the overall marketing, planning, and control of a product and *the integration of those functions influencing the success of the venture*. By the 1930s, the U.S. Air Force was starting to use *project offices* to monitor the progress of aircraft developments, and process engineering companies such as Exxon had begun to develop the project engineer function to follow a project as it progressed through various functional departments (Morris 1994).

In the construction industries, Bechtel first used the term *project manager* in the 1950s, and the Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline in Canada (1951–1953) was the first project for which the company functioned as the project manager. In Australia, Civil and Civic Pty Ltd adopted the idea of *project management* and was marketing its capability to clients by 1958.

By the end of the 1950s, the idea of appointing a project manager either as an individual or as an organization to take full and undivided responsibility for achieving the project objectives had arrived and was starting to spread (Stretton 1994).

The Emergence of Project Management, and Project Management Associations

As the concept of delineating major works as *projects* spread, associations emerged that were focused on exploring and defining the concepts of project management. According to (Weaver 2007), the two key factors that led to the beginning of the project management professional consciousness were the invention of the Critical Path Method (CPM) of scheduling in the late 1950s (Weaver 2006), and the development and acceptance of the *iron triangle* of time, cost, and output (scope and quality) by Dr. Martin Barnes in 1969. Almost all of the people involved in the establishment of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) and the Project Management Institute (PMI) were schedulers, and the iron triangle provided the basis for a more rounded approach to delivering value.

The development of general management theory in the United States through to the 1960s was another critical underpinning for the creation of *modern project management*. Most of the ideas implicit in the early days of project management (from the 1960s to the 1980s) are firmly rooted in the ideas of Scientific Management.

Once founded, the various project management associations have led the development of a defined and documented project management body of knowledge. Only after the body of knowledge was formulated did it become possible to define project management competencies, formally examine project management knowledge, and start the process of creating the profession of project management.

Over the last 40 years, initially supported by practitioners and, more lately, by most of academia, the project management associations have:

- Developed a generally consistent view of the processes involved in project management
- Encoded these views into Bodies of Knowledge (BoKs)
- Described competent behaviors and are now certifying knowledgeable and/or competent project managers
- Conducted both academic and practitioner-focused conferences around the world
- Sponsored research into various aspects of project management
- Worked to create a global community of project managers

The central theme running through the various BoKs is that project management is an integrative process that focuses on the project life cycle from initiation (or concept) through to the transfer of the *product* created by the project to the client followed by closure of the project. Project management has at its core the balancing of the *iron triangle* of time, cost, and output (scope / quality), and the objective of project management is the completion of the project, as efficiently as possible, to the satisfaction of the project's stakeholders.

More recently, new management viewpoints have emerged that have been, or are being, incorporated into the concept of project management. Some of the key themes include:

- Quality management which emphasizes achieving customer satisfaction by providing high-quality goods and services;

- Reengineering the organization (business process reorganization)
- Chaos theory, which models the corporation as a complex adaptive system that interacts and evolves with its surroundings
- Project / program and portfolio management (PPP) and the concept of various PMOs

The Evolution of the Project Manager

Prior to the 1950s, the people controlling the work that today we would call a *project* described themselves as priests, engineers, architects, generals, or civic leaders. It would have been impossible to accomplish some of the massive developments described in history without many of the techniques of project management, but no one was a *project manager* — there was no such role.

Through the next phase of this evolution, people were appointed to run projects, but there were no recognized standards or certifications because the project management associations had not invented them! The *accidental project manager* was born and has lived in the folklore of business projects for more than a generation (Bourne 2005). *Accidental project managers* are individuals assigned to projects because they were available, not because they had any project management knowledge or skills. Some *accidental project managers* have been, and are, remarkably successful; but many others find themselves blamed for problems and project failures they are ill-equipped to predict or prevent. The advent of project management training, certifications and career paths should have consigned the *accidental project manager* to history; unfortunately, this is not the case.

The end of the twentieth century saw the emergence of the *qualified project manager*. A key focus of all project management associations, worldwide, has been the codification of project management knowledge and the examination and certification of project managers based on the defined knowledge framework. Initially, the knowledge tested was focused on the iron triangle of scheduling, cost, and scope control; this quickly expanded to include risk and quality management.

Recognizing knowledge alone is insufficient; trends in the twenty-first century include a shift towards measuring and certifying competency. Competency assessment looks at the willingness and the ability of the project manager to successfully apply knowledge to achieve outcomes. The other major trend has been a steadily increasing emphasis on the importance of team-building and stakeholder relationship management. These requirements are now firmly embedded in the knowledge framework against which a qualified project manager is examined and are inherent in the ability of a project manager to achieve successful outcomes working through and with people that are measured in a competency assessment.

New age project leaders need these foundations to be able to deal with the challenges of leading knowledge workers in virtual teams to create new products or services for a global market. The new age leader is also highly likely to be a proficient *business project manager*. The new age business project manager realizes that project success is measured in terms of the value realized by the organization and by stakeholder satisfaction. Rather than the project being an end in itself, it is seen as part of the organization's strategic mission, with its success being defined by how well the project's outputs help the organization achieve its desired outcomes. Finally, the combination of qualified project managers working in support of organizational objectives, supported by global project management associations is steadily transforming project management from a skill into a full-fledged profession.

A Brief History of Organizations

From the start of formal organizations through to the 1950s, the organization structure was primarily functional, with the organization of each functional group focused hierarchically as well as inwardly. Matrix structures emerged with the advent of project engineers in major U.S. defense organizations. Initially, the project manager had no authority and had to “beg, borrow, or steal” resources to deliver the project. Since the time of these early beginnings in the 1950s, the concept of matrix organizations has matured, supported by the maturing of project, program, and portfolio management and the introduction of various forms of PMOs.

In some industries, a projectized structure has evolved in which most of the people work on projects and for project managers. This structure is particularly common in engineering and construction organizations and is becoming more common in ICT and other businesses. All three types of organization exist currently; the creation of matrix and projectized organizations is a direct consequence of the development of projects and project management.

The Hero Project Manager

Exhibit 1 maps the evolution of organizations, projects, and project management; it also highlights a disturbing trend in the development of our profession. Based on the legend of the “CEO as hero” (Dinsmore and Cabanis-Brewin 2006), popular during the 1980s and then again in the “noughties,” and a product of the new risk-seeking deregulated markets that arose in the United States and the United Kingdom, the concept of the project manager as the *CEO of the project* emerged, building on from an earlier and still current concept of the *hero project manager*.

The *hero project manager* is a highly skilled practitioner who operates almost single-handedly to create project success. The *hero* is so focused on the “hard” qualities of project success defined by the *iron triangle* that there is little time for utilizing the strengths of the team or engaging stakeholders. He or she is the “Lone Ranger” delivering on time and within budget despite organizational obstructions. This model of project manager is the antithesis of the *new age business project manager* described earlier in this paper. The emergence of the *hero project manager* can be understood in the context of the *accidental project manager* (prior to the emergence of the qualified project manager), but in the current day, the CEO hero is discredited and there is no legitimate place for accidental project managers.

Hero is defined as *a person distinguished by exceptional courage and strength, a leader - a person who guides and inspires others, a mythical being, and also a fighter and a champion* (Oxford 2001). From these basic definitions it is not difficult to see the attraction of being such a leader or being the follower of such a leader. In the 1980s, the project manager was encouraged to aspire to the role of *CEO of the project*. Such a perspective allowed the project manager, who actually had very little authority in the functional or matrix structures of the organization, to operate as if he or she actually had the authority of the CEO of the organization. This perspective did not influence the rest of the organization to accept the concept, and without authority, the project manager was forced to continue the heroic activities that were accepted as the best way to achieve project success at the time. Even the concept of the *CEO as hero* had very little basis in reality; again it did influence CEOs and executive leaders in organizations to act differently, taking risks and making autocratic decisions that might result in instability and alienation of staff and often customers and other stakeholders as well (Senge 2000). Rather than seeking a replacement for the CEO or the project manager (Senge 2000) and (Collins 2001) are among those who support a different style of leadership.

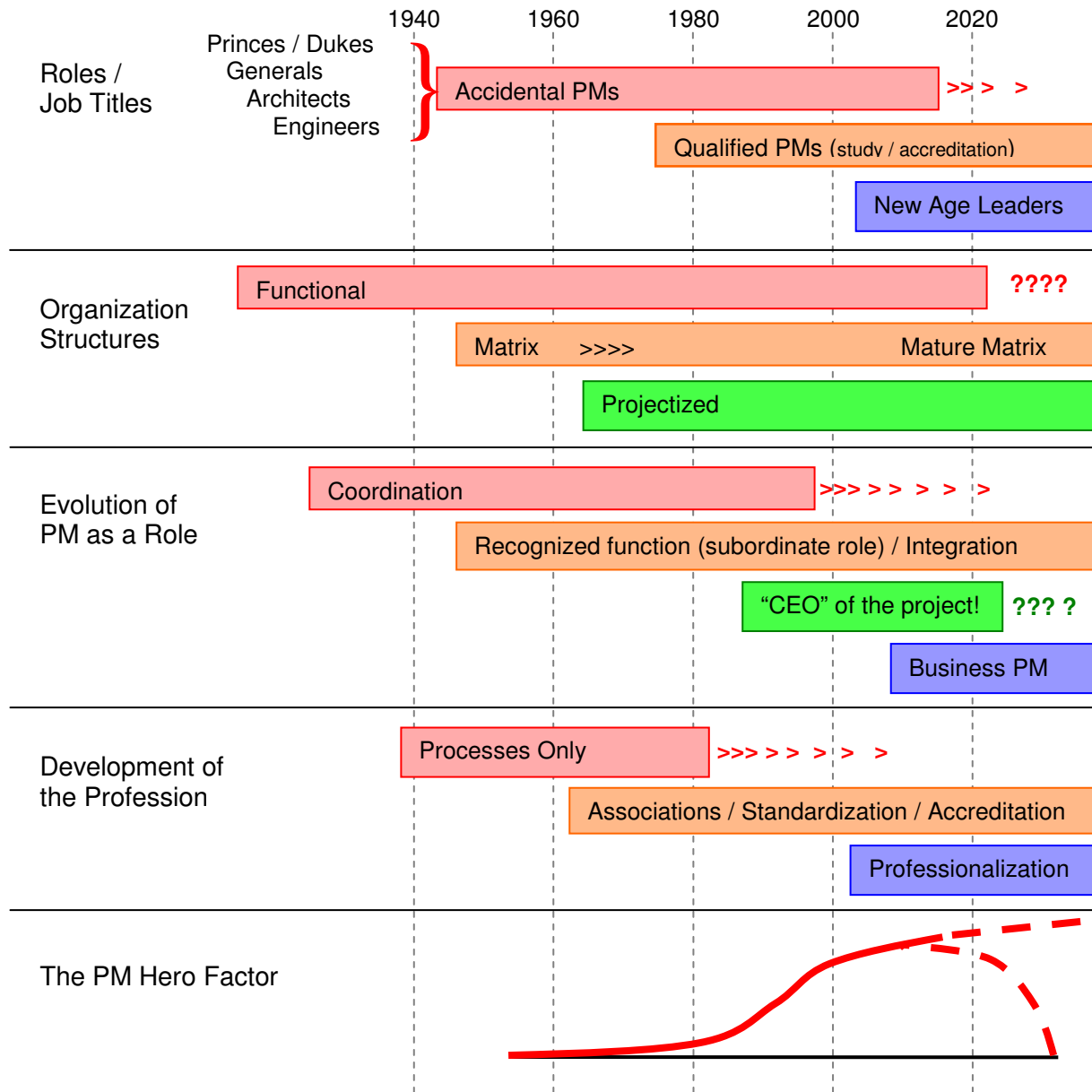


Exhibit 1: Connections between organizational structures and the role of the project manager.

The Nature of Leadership

Leadership can be defined simply as a relationship with two major components: Leaders must have followers, and these followers must be inspired or motivated to achieve a joint vision. To maintain the loyalty of followers and to continue to inspire them requires flexibility and credibility. Personal styles and characteristics defined by traditional leadership theory as promoting leadership success include a combination of:

- Creativity
- Analysis and judgement
- Resilience and persuasiveness
- Emotional maturity often described as “emotional intelligence”(Goleman 2000)

The paradox of leadership

The expectations that organizations and their people have for their leaders requires a combination of control and creativity or analysis and judgment. This paradox results in organizations requiring their leaders to be *heroes*, even superhuman. Management theories of leadership have emphasized (or developed) the concept of the *CEO as hero*. Jim Collins describes a different way of thinking about leadership (Collins 2001). From his research into the leadership of long-term sustainable organizations — “what makes an organization great?” he developed a hierarchy of leadership qualities and characteristics culminating in level 5 leadership, which he has defined as a blend of “humility” and “will” that moves a company to sustainable greatness.

The *CEO as hero* equates to Collins’ level-4 leadership. This is the paradox of leadership: the qualities that Collins identified do not necessarily result in the CEO or other executives being the “front man” of the organization or the one that must lead the troops into battle. The level-5 leader is a strategist, recognizes the path that an organization must take for success, but also empowers the management team to meet the challenges.

Just as there is recognition that the *hero* CEO must work with others and through others, there must be a parallel recognition in the world of projects that the most effective project managers will also work with others and through others to provide value to the organization by delivering business results through the work of the project. Along with the tools and skills that the project manager / new-age business leader must acquire is the understanding of who the *right* stakeholders are at any given time, who is best to manage the relationships around the work of the project, and how best to engage these important stakeholders through targeted communication (Bourne 2009). Along with the right tools, a different set of skills needs to be acquired for success for *the new age business project manager*. These skills are level 5 leadership (humility and will), finely honed communication skills, an ability to balance the three elements of project success — delivery of value, management of risk and opportunity, and management of relationships — as well as the clear understanding that the outcome of the project is not just an application or a new process but value to the organization that can be measured and monitored.

Conclusion

In the journey described in this paper, the importance in the consciousness and self-consciousness of projects, project management, organizations, and the view of what a project manager does is continually evolving. It is even possible to link some of the changes to the changing views of what a good project is and does. From where success depended only on an emphasis on schedule and budget, to where the goal post is changed, with uncertainty as a constant, with value as paramount, and where agility must be accompanied by compliance with process and consistent practice. The definitions of what is excellent are also changing. There is no place for a “Lone Ranger”: to be successful in the world of business-focused project management, the project manager needs to work within a collaborative stakeholder environment, understanding who is important right now and ensuring that all that can be done to engage these stakeholders is being done. The “hero” must learn to delegate, motivate, and communicate in this new environment.

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