

Understanding ‘Expert Judgement’

The **PMBOK® Guide** uses the concept of *expert judgement* in many of its processes but only has a relatively brief description of the concept. It describes expert judgement as *judgement based on expertise as appropriate for the activity being performed* and advises that *such expertise may be provided by any group or person with specialised education, knowledge, skills, experience or training*. This description leaves open three questions this article is focused on answering:

- What is **expertise** and how did you define it?
- What is the **judgement** process needed to apply the expertise?
- Where to find the necessary **expertise** to assist you in making a wise **judgement**?

The first element in considering *expert judgement* is the understanding that obtaining the expertise necessary to arrive at a sensible judgement is not the exclusive responsibility of the project manager – you do not have to be the expert! However, as the manager responsible for the conduct of the project, the project manager is undoubtedly responsible for the consequences of any judgements that are made. The expertise of the project manager should be focused on knowing how to obtain the necessary expert advice and then on how to use that advice to arrive at the optimum decision for the project. In many cases this may require the expert to actively participate in developing the best solution.

Finding an Expert

The first challenge in applying expert judgement is identifying the right people with the right expertise to provide the advice needed to arrive at a sensible, or even wise, judgement. By definition an expert is a person



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whose opinion by virtue of education, training, certification, skills or experience, is recognised as being an *expert opinion*. The problem with this definition is firstly it is intensely subjective and secondly different experts will frequently have very different opinions around the same question or set of facts. It is not uncommon in courts of law for opposing parties to both have eminent experts in a particular field and for those two experts to hold diametrically different opinions as to the best interpretation of a circumstance or set of facts.

One of the key services an organisation can offer to its project managers is having a list of known experts with their area of expertise defined.

However, even with this help in place, the process of seeking expert opinion opens up a number of challenges. Some of the most significant are:

- **The Dunning-Kruger effect**, this is a cognitive bias wherein persons of low ability suffer from illusory superiority, mistakenly assessing their expertise as being greater than it is. This derives from the inability of low-ability persons to recognise their own ineptitude; they don't know what they don't know about the problem - this can easily lead to 'false experts' advocating solutions

true experts find ridiculous¹. As a corollary: highly skilled individuals frequently underestimate their relative competence, erroneously assuming that tasks which are easy for them are also easy for others.

- **Expert Bias 1** - the inability for a person who has mastered a skill to understand how useful that skill can be to a lay person and/or they find it extremely difficult to think about problems from the perspective of lesser-informed people and provide information in a way that is 'useful' to people with less expertise (eg, by avoiding the use of expert jargon).
- **Expert Bias 2** – the tendency of less expert people to place too much reliance on the advice of experts.

One of the challenges in gathering information to inform an expert judgement is that because of the Dunning-Kruger effect, people with limited knowledge will often be absolutely certain about the facts *"The obvious right answer has to be"* (which is frequently the 'simple, easy to implement, wrong solution'); whereas experts being more cognisant of what they 'don't know' and having the knowledge to appreciate the complexity and depth of a problem will frequently only provide a probabilistic answer *"I would suggest this option but....."*. The challenge for the decision maker is to make sure the information brought into the judgement process is the best information, not the information that is advocated most loudly.



Experienced experts also understand that a key aspect of their role is to determine the scope of accountability for their work. Experts not only offer expertise, but also accept accountability for the application of their expertise in accordance with their expert role. To facilitate the judgement process, good experts separate their finding of facts (usually based on research) from the opinions they derive from the facts based on their intuition and experience, and do not provide opinions on aspects of the problem which lay outside of their area of expertise.

Wise Judgements

In the context of *expert judgement*, judgement is an action verb – it is the ability to make considered decisions or come to sensible conclusions based on information and knowledge derived from the application of expertise. While the project manager can, and frequently should, seek expert advice to help inform his or her judgement, ultimately the considered decision that comes out of the judgement process is the responsibility of the project manager.

¹ The journey to expertise has been defined as:

- **Unconscious incompetence:** The person does not understand something and does not know they don't know.
- **Conscious incompetence:** The person knows they do not understand something, recognises the deficit and is prepared to learn.
- **Conscious competence:** The person understands something. However, applying the knowledge or skill requires concentration.
- **Unconscious competence:** The person has had so much practice applying the knowledge or skill that it can be performed easily. But the person may not recognise how skilled they are.

The defining competence of every good manager, project managers being no exception, is their ability to make effective and timely decisions. Their decision-making process may be assisted by involving others to help work towards obtaining the best outcome but the final responsibility remains the managers. The challenge is balancing the importance of the decision, the timeframe in which the decision is required, the cost (including opportunity costs) accrued in reaching the decision, and the availability of the resources used in the decision making process. One tool that can assist in this process is Occam's Razor².

This is not new! 2400 years ago, Aristotle described *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which is focused on working out the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance³ – this is still a key attribute for successful project managers.

However, a considered decision does not mean a correct decision, or even the best decision; every magistrate and judge knows that every one of their judgements is potentially subject to appeal and knows that on appeal they will frequently find their judgement overturned in the Superior Court; their job is to deliver the best judgement they can on the information available – so is yours!

The key elements of a considered and effective judgement are:

- Obtaining the best information available in the time available (this will always be less than the desirable amount of information)
- Balancing and weighing information within an appropriate decision-making framework, and
- Actually making the decision in the timeframe necessary!

Making an expert judgement

Bringing expertise and decision making skills together to form an 'expert judgement' works best in a structured process. PMI's publication '*Expert Judgment in Project Management: Narrowing the Theory-Practice Gap*' outlines a framework to conduct expert judgment that includes the following seven steps:

1. Frame the problem,
2. Plan the elicitation of expert opinions,
3. Select the appropriate experts,
4. Brief/train the experts so they can contribute effectively,
5. Elicit their opinions/judgments,
6. Analyse and combine the information to create your 'expert judgment', and
7. Document and communicate the results.

Whilst the focus of the PMI book is on 'big judgements' with teams of experts helping formulate major decisions, these basic steps are important in reaching a wise decision in almost every circumstance.

To achieve this, the key skill a project manager needs is the ability to bring the right experts into the decision-making process and then make sure a good decision is reached in the timeframe required. This is a

² **Occam's razor** (or Ockham's razor) is a principle from philosophy that proposes that if there are two equally valid explanations for an occurrence the simpler one is usually better. Another way of saying it is that the more assumptions you have to make, the more unlikely an explanation is. However, there is a difference between the simplest valid alternative and an invalid simplistic option.

³ For more on *phronesis* see:

<https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2017/05/21/phronesis-a-key-attribute-for-project-managers/>



facilitative skill and good project managers are experts at facilitation⁴ and delegation⁵. Some understanding of the subject matter is still important, you cannot be an expert facilitator, or an effective decision maker, if you do not understand the significance of what is being said by the experts. But being an expert facilitator is a very different use of knowledge to being the subject-matter expert.

The best way to apply 'expert judgement' depends on the level of expertise of the project manager and the importance of the decision being made. Therefore a very early decision in the 'expert judgement' process is deciding if the project manager will be the expert, the decision maker and/or a facilitator of the process. There are four basic options:

1. If the decision is needed quickly, or has relatively limited consequences, and the project manager has expertise, the PM uses his/her knowledge to make the decision⁶.
2. If the decision is needed quickly, and has relatively limited consequences, but the project manager does not have expertise, the PM delegates the decision making to an expert³.
3. If the decision is important and the project manager has expertise, the PM seeks advice and suggestion from others and based on this input uses his/her knowledge to make the decision.
4. If the PM is not an expert in the subject matter of the decision, or the decision has major consequences, the PM facilitates the obtaining of expert advice from others and facilitates the decision making process.

There are many dangers if the project manager tries to be the lead technical expert in every decision making process in the project he or she is managing, including the creation of a major bottleneck in decision making and severely reducing the range of options tabled and level of knowledge used in the decision-making process. An expert in making 'expert judgements' knows when they need to be involved in the process (and the optimum level of involvement) and when they simply need to make sure a good decision is reached by appropriate experts.

Summary

In an organisational context, the 'expert' part of expert judgement is closely aligned with effective knowledge management. The organisation needs to make information available to its managers about the sources and types of expertise available, and the location of useful experts. This information needs to be updated on a regular basis and be accessible.

The 'judgement' part of expert judgement on the other hand is part of the skill set of the individual manager. Their innate abilities should be supported with training and a culture that rewards a proactive approach to deciding.

If significant decisions are needed on a regular basis within the organisation, then as recommended in '*Expert Judgment in Project Management*', standard operating processes should be defined to reinforce the practice of obtaining an expert judgement, using the organisations knowledge resources.

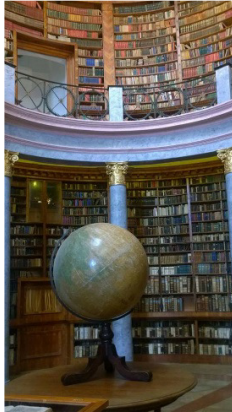
⁴ For more on **facilitation** see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1067_Facilitation.pdf

⁵ For more on **delegation** see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1091_Delegation.pdf

⁶ For more on the **different types of decision** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf



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