THE ACCIDENTAL PROJECT MANAGER

THE GETTING OF WISDOM

Presented at

JUGGLING ANARCHY
WITH FEARLESS ABILITY

PROJECT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF NEW ZEALAND
ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2005

Auckland, 13th – 14th October 2005

by

Lynda Bourne BA(Hons), PMP, Director of Training.

For more stakeholder management papers see:
https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-075.php

Previewed at

30th Oct to 2nd Sept. 2005

{ The journey from reluctance to success }

INTRODUCTION

The ever-increasing demand for more project managers is creating divergent pressures on the project management profession. In one direction, project managers are seeking training and accreditation as a means of increasing their professionalism, raising their profile, and making themselves more marketable in a competitive market. At the same time, many organisations, with limited understanding of the 'profession and practice' of project management still appoint almost anyone to the role of project manager, keeping the concept of the 'accidental project manager' alive and flourishing.

The accidental project manager has lived in the folklore of business projects for a generation. 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 remarkably successful; but many find themselves blamed for problems and project failures they were ill-equipped to prevent. It is important to help accidental project managers be successful not only to encourage them to remain in the profession but also because every project failure is a failure for the PM profession.

Working alongside the accidental project manager are the novice project managers who have decided to choose project management as their career. They too may have come from other disciplines; they too need help to be successful. The difference is that they intend to stay in the profession. Whatever the origin of these inexperienced project managers, there is a need to develop their project management skills and to do whatever is possible to help them be successful to ensure the benefits their projects are created to deliver are realised.

This paper will briefly explore the phenomenon of accidental project managers and ways to help them and their novice colleagues to increase their chances of project success. A detailed description of the project management skills needed for success forms the major part of this paper. A methodology and visualisation tool, the *Stakeholder Circle™* is briefly described as one powerful tool to support PMs at all levels of skills and experience. The final section is a discussion on how organisations and the PM profession can support accidental project managers and other novice project managers deliver their project successfully and through that support encourage them to make project management their career.

THE ACCIDENTAL PROJECT MANAGER

(Pinto and Kharbanda 1995) have defined the concept of 'accidental project manager' by exploring the differences between the accidental project manager and the career project manager; this is summarised in Table 1. The accidental PM usually has a technical background – engineer, programmer, systems analyst; or some expertise in the field in which the project is delivering functionality: for example, sales managers in a sales support system, and human resource managers in a HR system. By contrast, the career PM will normally have, or seek, formal project management education, and have, or seek, experience in management and organisational skills. The career PM may also have some knowledge relating to the functionality, features or industry of the project deliverables.

Table 1 - Differences between accidental and career project manager
(Pinto and Kharbanda 1995)

Issue	Accidental (or interim) project manager	Career project manager
Education	Technical: engineering or 'hard' science	Project area: management, engineering, functional
Entry to Project Management	Accidental	Planned – after qualifying
Progression desire	Return to technical field	Remain in Project Management
Advanced education	Unknown, possibly technical	Project Management
View of Project Management	Necessary evil, one career step, unwelcome intrusion into career	Interesting, challenging, rewarding, progression of increasingly more challenging assignments
Professional orientation goals	Specialist, technical recognition	Generalist, managerial advancement
Knowledge or skill required	Technical, detailed, in-depth, line managers with management experience	General, broad scope, Professional Project Management

The data in Table 1 is supported by research that shows that project success and failure is located in the 'softer' side of project management responsibilities – success is created by effective leadership, team management, stakeholder management (Pinto and Kharbanda 1995; Thomas, Delisle et al. 2001; Crawford and Da Ros 2002; Turner and Veil 2002, and through understanding the importance of value, risk and relationships, and the language of business (Thomas, 2002; Bourne and Walker 2003; Crawford 2004; Bourne and Walker 2005). These skills are acquired through many years and over many projects and are rarely displayed by the 'conscripted' accidental PM or the novice PM. Therefore, a career project manager who has acquired these skills and experience will have a better chance of being successful than either an interim 'accidental' PM or a novice PM.

Recent research has linked the views on project management of senior management in an organisation, to a 'knowing-doing' gap; a lack of understanding of the importance of project management in delivering the organisation's strategic goals (Thomas, Delisle et al. 2002). The realisation that 'something must be done' immediately to deliver to this strategy is often followed by a reactive selection of an individual (any individual) to lead the project without adequate preparation or support. The precarious position that project managers hold in many organisations is a symptom of this 'knowing-doing gap'; caused by senior executives

applying a tactical solution to solve a strategic problem. The result is that individuals appointed to a project management role will have little support from management for the application of appropriate project management techniques and will lack organisational authority. The resulting lack of power and expertise can only have one outcome – failure of the projects and blame for the individual.

From the literature it is evident that many project managers enter the profession reluctantly and unprepared, and that organisations, and the PM profession, do not support them appropriately or adequately (KPMG 2005;Thomas, Delisle et al. 2002). The rest of this paper will discuss three dimensions of project management skills and ways that project managers can be better supported within that skills and experience framework. This paper will focus on two aspects of this support: provision of methodologies to support the requirements of project relationship management for success, in particular the *Stakeholder Circle™* methodology and visualisation tool; and development of training strategies to support and encourage them in their PM roles.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT SKILLS DEFINED

Project teams and their stakeholders operating in today's climate must demonstrate a high level of flexibility and leadership. They must also demonstrate the ability to 'read' the organisation and the stakeholders that operate within it, to find ways to work together to jointly deliver successful outcomes (Mintzberg 1989; Viney 1997);Theilen 1999).

A successful project manager must be able to balance the requirements of the *art* and *craft,* of *management* and *leadership;* understand the different 'dimensions' of project management and develop the skills needed to operate effectively in each dimension. Figure 3, 2 and 3 define the cumulative framework of project skills that will be discussed in this section.
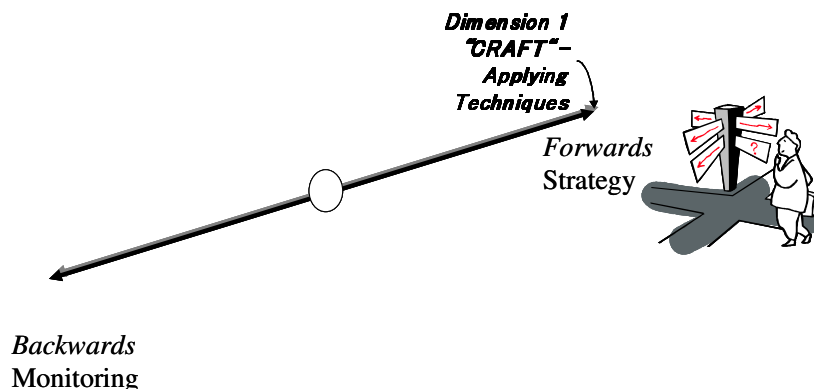

Figure 1: the *craft* of project management (Dimension 1)

Dimension 1 - *looking forwards and backwards* is primarily about the *craft* of project management and covers many of the aspects of the project success element – *delivering value.* The skills and knowledge required for this dimension are fundamental to successful delivery of project objectives. Commonly known as 'hard' skills, they encompass knowledge about, and methods for, planning, estimating, developing schedules and tracking performance, and reporting typically found in Project Management manuals (Turner 1999; Verzun 1999; Buttrick 2000; Meredith and Mantel Jr 2000; Murch 2001; Schwalbe 2002) and

Guides to the PM Body of Knowledge such as PMBOK Guide 3rd Edition (PMI 2004), as well as in papers for conferences and journals. While instructions for developing plans and schedules, gathering requirements, or developing estimates include the concept of working with others, the skills of managing relationships or facilitating workshops are not usually part of the knowledge or skillset required for success in Dimension 1.
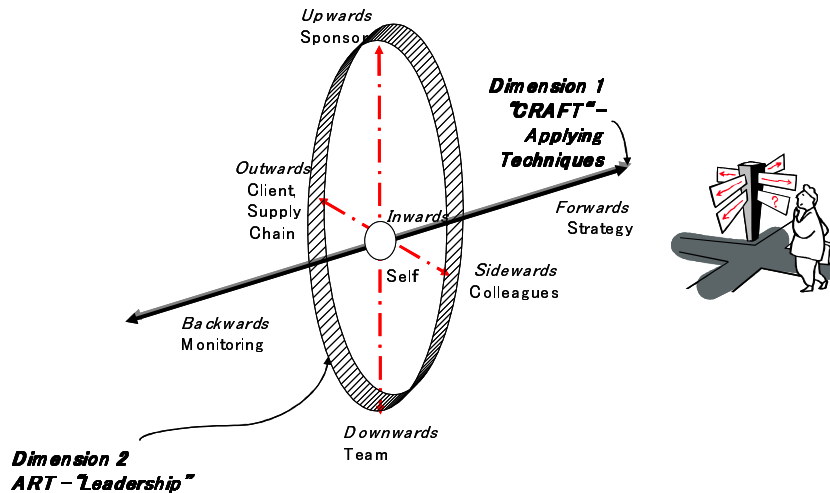

Figure 2 - the *art* of leadership (Dimension 2)

Dimension 2 – *looking upwards* (managing the expectations of senior management), *downwards* (leading the team)*, inwards* (managing oneself)*, outwards* (stakeholders external to the project, such as users, contractors, regulators)*, and sidewards* (one's peers) is about the 'art' of leadership. A project manager at this level of skill and experience will be considered competent within the profession and can confidently be expected to deliver successful projects. A 'competent' project manager should understand the factors that contribute to project success, ensuring that user involvement, executive support, and that clear business objectives are achieved. A project manager at this level will also have general management skills and knowledge for managing teams, dealing with procurement issues, risk management, and senior management reports. Understanding of the concept of managing different types of stakeholders in different ways is an essential part of the project manager's *art* **and** *craft.* Another essential element is knowledge and understanding of the processes required to identify project stakeholders and their 'how, why and when' issues so that these needs might be best addressed. The effective use of tools such as the *Stakeholder Circle™[1]* can assist in identifying and assessing stakeholders. The guidelines for this level of competency, skill, and experience are the requirements for PMI's PMP (Project Management Professional) accreditation[2].

Dimension 3 – *beyond managing and leading* represents a project manager who has acquired the appropriate skillset and experience to understand and to know how to 'tap into the powerlines' (Bourne and Walker 2003), to work within an organisation's culture to engage the appropriate stakeholders through a mutual relationship. This relationship ensures that the stakeholders' expectations are met and those same stakeholders understand what has to be done to advance the project's success, and are willing to do this. The difference between a 'successful' project manager with 3rd Dimension skills and 'knowhow' and others is that this

---

[1] Discussed later in this paper

[2] These guidelines can be found at www.pmi.org

project manager has the experience, knowledge and capability to understand and to do what has to be done and is also willing and positioned in that organisation to do what is necessary to ensure success. These skills are often only acquired through 'learning experiences' or 'hard knocks'; most effectively in a 'learning environment' categorised by a mature, blame-free environment.
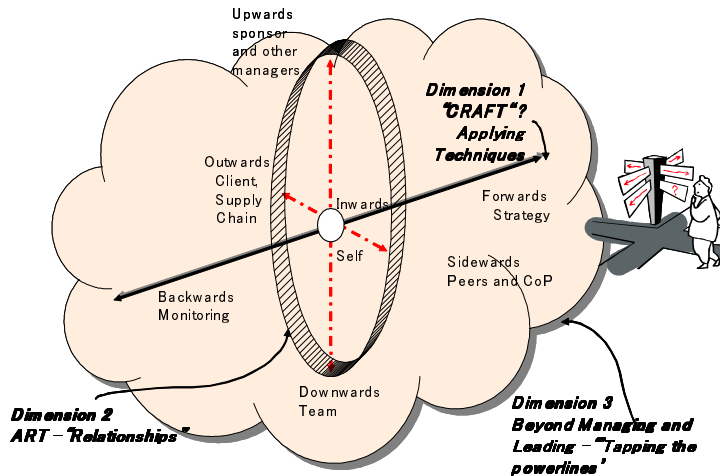

Figure 3 - Dimensions of project management (Bourne and Walker 2003)

Table 2 summarises the skills and knowledge that a project manager requires at each dimension by considering the different levels of PM skills and knowledge and the relationships with the stakeholder community with the PMBOK knowledge areas.

Table 2 - PM skills and knowledge framework

Dimension	Success 'element'	'Influence'	PMBOK Areas	PM skill and knowledge
Dimension 1 – Craft 'naïve'	Delivering Value (both cost component and benefits)	Strategy Monitoring	Scope Time Cost Quality	Knowledge and skills in using tools and methodology for estimating, executing and reporting
Dimension 2 – Leadership 'competent' and 'accredited'	Managing Risk (through leadership as well as through managing uncertainty and risk)	Management Team PM self Users, contractors and other (externals) PM peers and Communities of Practice	Risk Procurement HR Communic-ations Integration	Leadership Proactive management Successful delivery of objectives are met Risks managed appropriately
Dimension 3 Relationships 'experienced' 'project director' level	Managing Relation-ships proactively	Understanding 'culture' and working to manage expectations		Knowledge 'Wisdom'

Project managers can be categorised as 'novice', 'competent' or 'successful' through an assessment against these three dimensions of project management. A novice is new to project management, either an accidental project manager or a junior project manager. The novice project manager will have either *craft* **or** *art* skills, where *craft* is expertise in the 'hard' aspects of PM; building, maintaining and monitoring schedule, budget and scope/quality and *art* is the ability to apply management and leadership skills through management experience outside PM or through a natural ability. The accidental project manager may have neither of these skills.

The 'competent' project manager will have both *craft* **and** *art* skills and is of a standard to gain accreditation from a project management professional body, such as PMI. In applying to do the PMP accreditation exam, a project manager with a university degree, must be able to provide evidence of at least 4,500 hours of project experience within the last six years and a minimum of 36 months directing and leading work on projects.

A 'successful' project manager will be experienced in successfully managing large, complex projects through the project lifecycle, while being willing and capable of mentoring other, less experienced project managers. The 'successful' project manager will display and embrace 3rd Dimension skills of proactively working within an organisation's culture and power structures – its 'politics'. In this typology of project management skills and experience, the accidental project manager is at a major disadvantage, through perhaps being at the level of 'novice' but without the incentives, either personal or from the organisation to succeed – if indeed the accidental project manager understands what project success is.
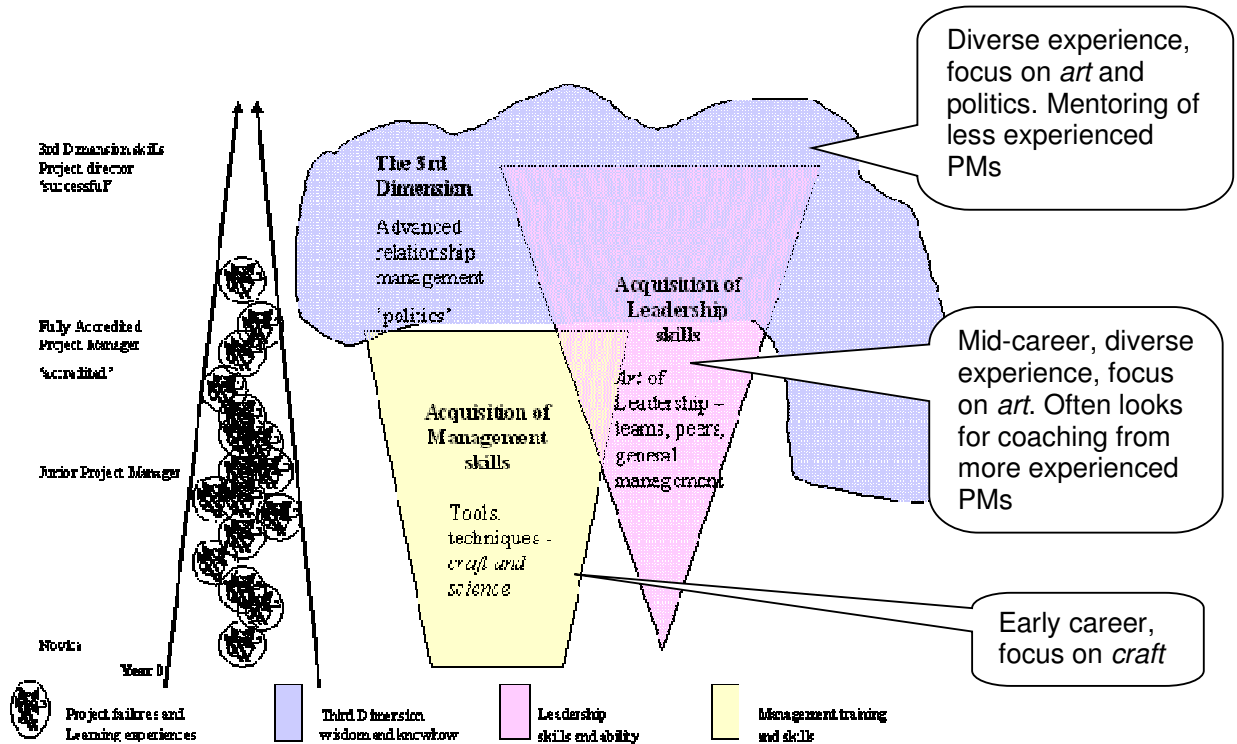

Figure 4 - The 'getting of PM wisdom' (Bourne and Walker 2004)

Figure 4 illustrates how a project manager may develop from 'novice' through to 'successful' over time, with the help of his/her own organisation and the project management profession. A key prerequisite for improving project success rates is for both organisations employing project managers and the project management profession to develop strategies to train and develop junior project managers and accidental project managers, and provide them with a clear career path within the profession. PMI's CAPM is a step in this direction, but needs more support from industry.

Figure 4 shows that one of the primary ways that project management skills and 'wisdom' is acquired is through experience, both positive – through project success, and negative – through reflecting on and learning from, failure. The 3rd Dimension skills, *wisdom and knowhow,* are usually acquired in mid-career. These skills, understanding the politics and culture of the organisation and having the ability and willingness to work within that context, are hard won. They cannot easily be taught, articulated, documented, or codified; this is *tacit* knowledge. Organisations and more experienced PMs can help accidental and junior (novice) project managers develop the ability to deliver successful projects by helping them hone their 'soft' skills; flexibility, leadership and communications. Leaders with extensive backgrounds in organisational politics complete more projects more successfully because they manage the appropriate aspects of their stakeholders (upwards and outwards, sidewards) while at the same time being able to tailor their technological vision to the day-to-day reality of their organisations (Peled 2000).

SUPPORTING THE PROJECT MANAGER

As discussed earlier in this paper, there are two main ways that project managers can be assisted to deliver successful project: the first is through the provision of methodologies that support PMs at any level of skill or experience to build and maintain robust project relationships; the second is through strategies for developing the skills of existing and potential project managers. One tool is described – the *Stakeholder Circle®.* This tool and the methodology that supports it was the result of the author's doctoral research into successful project management relationships. It is offered in this paper as one example of a tool that will support project managers deliver projects successfully through a supported methodology for identification of the key project stakeholders and strategies to understand and manage their expectations[3].

The *Stakeholder Circle®* is based on the premise that a project can only exist with the informed consent of its stakeholder community (Weaver and Bourne 2002), and that managing the relationships between the community and the project will increase the chances of project success. This community consists of individuals and groups, each with a different potential to influence the project's outcome positively or negatively (Bourne and Walker 2003). The *Stakeholder Circle* methodology has been devised to offer a mechanism for assessing the relative influence of each of a project's key stakeholders. The *Stakeholder Circle* visualisation tool highlights the project's key stakeholders as a reference for the team, the stakeholders, and others to understand who has been judged by the project team as essential for project success. The benefit of this methodology and tool is derived in part from the analysis process itself as well as from the ease with which a key stakeholder's influence on the project can be judged once the project's unique *Stakeholder Circle* is complete. The

---

[3]   More details are available at https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-076.php

For more papers in this series see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI.php

assessment should be updated regularly as the stakeholder set changes to reflect the dynamic nature of project relationships.

Categorisation and charting of key stakeholders holds the key to targeting the *right* stakeholders at the *right* time in the life of the project and providing them with the *right* level of engagement, information and communication (Bourne and Walker 2005). It is a flexible device that can be adjusted to cater for changes in stakeholder membership and influence throughout the life of the project. Figure 5 shows the prototype *Stakeholder Circle*™. Each *Stakeholder Circle*™ is unique to a particular project at a particular phase of the project lifecycle.

The methodology is supported by software which aids the identification and prioritisation of stakeholders, through understanding their roles and the 'mutuality' between each stakeholder and the project, and data necessary for developing the engagement strategy. The methodology will improve a project's relationship management without the use of this software support. The software adds value by automating the complex calculations required for the prioritisation exercise and the development of the project's unique *Stakeholder Circle™.*
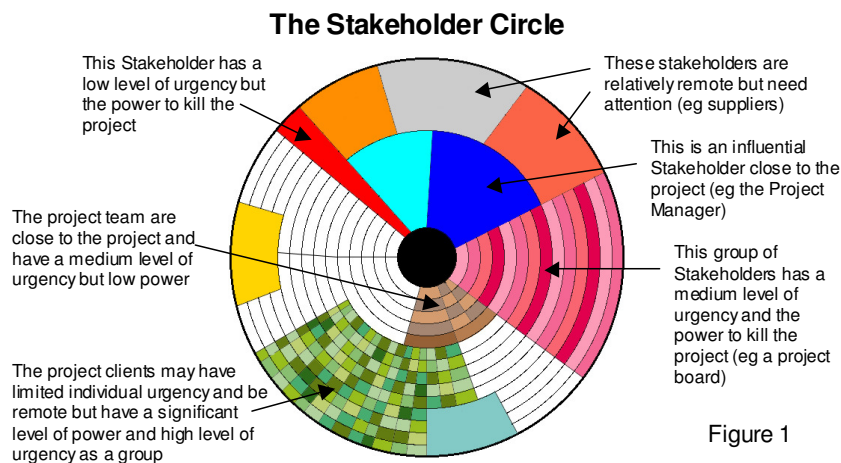

The Stakeholder Circle

This Stakeholder has a low level of urgency but the power to kill the project

These stakeholders are relatively remote but need attention (eg suppliers)

This is an influential Stakeholder close to the project (eg the Project Manager)

The project team are close to the project and have a medium level of urgency but low power

This group of Stakeholders has a medium level of urgency and the power to kill the project (eg a project board)

The project clients may have limited individual urgency and be remote but have a significant level of power and high level of urgency as a group

Figure 1

Figure 5 - The *Stakeholder Circle™* prototype

By considering and the 'mutual' needs of the stakeholders – *what the stakeholders require from the project (stakeholder expectations)* and *what the project needs from the stakeholders (stakeholder value),* a picture emerges of the best way to communicate to each stakeholder or stakeholder group and thus manage their expectations and perceptions. The next step is to define 'how' the message (any message) will be delivered – written, oral, formal and/or informal and who should deliver it and when. It does not need to be just the project manager; other members of the project team may be more appropriate and sometimes the project manager may have to brief another person who has more influence with the target of the message. The frequency and regularity of delivery of these messages will vary with the interests and level of support of the stakeholder as well as the stage of the project. This information will allow the project manager and the project team to influence people and outcomes; through building and nurturing what power they have in optimising 'coalitions of support (Boddy and Buchanan 1999), even if they lack formal power. This is the context of Dimension 3 of the PM skill set.

SUPPORT FOR ACCIDENTAL PROJECT MANAGERS

The second part of this section discusses ways that both organisations using projects to deliver their strategic goals and objectives and the project management profession, can support project managers develop the skills and experience necessary to deliver projects successfully and consistently. It is important to reflect on the roles that organisations and senior management should play because, many project managers will join the ranks of senior managers as part of career enrichment; these individuals can build a better environment for supporting project success.

Senior managers respond to competitive pressures and the need for change through projects in one of two ways:

1. Deny that there is a major problem and 'weather the storm' or 'make do' using existing staff in projects; thus, perpetuating the existence of accidental project managers. These staff will often be conscripted to the project without training, support, or incentive.

2. The alternative approach is to accept that effective project management will improve the situation, and respond either tactically or strategically. Tactical responses will include 'buy PM expertise' or buy PM software - 'PM in a box' for a quick fix. More strategic, longer term solutions will include 'growing PM' through investment in long-term, formal PM training, or hiring PMs. This approach closes the 'knowing-doing gap', the gap between knowing what has to be done and actually doing it in a strategic, sustainable way (Thomas, Delisle et al. 2002).

In the past, most organisations displayed the behaviours of approach 1. However, in many organisations today, where competitive advantage is tied to swift, effective development of products or services, projects are the mechanism of choice of this delivery. Organisations can no longer afford the luxury of allowing a PM's knowledge and experience to just evolve naturally. Along with the development of strategies to provide project managers with formal project management training, organisations must create opportunities for them to gain project expertise through apprenticeships, stretch assignments, coaching and mentoring, encouraging modes of collaboration such as Communities of Practice between employees, and supported by a strategy of job rotation. The wider the work experience of 'novice' and junior PMs, the more quickly the individual will be able to progress to 'competent' and then to operate in the 3rd Dimension, gaining the necessary *wisdom* to succeed. Job rotation, not only within the project management arena, but also between project management and general management assignments also extends the PM's network – thus ensuring a wider community of practitioners to draw on for advice. This is the outcome of a successful implementation of approach 2.

There are two aspects to consider in the light of a successful program of PM development. The first is that the organisation with the foresight to develop project management growth strategies such as those outlined in this section, will have well-trained, well-supported and properly recompensed individuals who will successfully manage projects and be eager to do so. The second aspect is that if approach 2 is universally applied, there may be no more accidental project managers. There will be no more strategic delivery crises to avert through unplanned conscription of reluctant individuals. There may however, be more individuals who are seeking to enter the ranks of project management and to pursue a project management career.

Wiser organisations are beginning to recognise that the consistent and successful delivery of projects requires 'successful' 3rd Dimension project managers. These project managers combine the *art* and *craft* of project management with the *wisdom* of 3rd Dimension skills to draw on the capability of the organisation to create success. Mature organisations also recognise that successful project managers require developing and nurturing, with effective training and support systems in place. These organisations have moved to create the environment needed to develop successful project managers who are capable of consistently delivering successful projects. In doing so, these organisations are gaining significant commercial advantage. The 2005 KPMG Survey has stated that the key to project success is to "Recognise project management as a core competency and develop … project management support and infrastructure (PMOs)" (KPMG 2005:26).

The project management profession can support the further development of the project management profession through setting standards, enforcing compliance and increasing the awareness of both the profession and its standards within the wider community (Pinto and Kharbanda 1995).

CONCLUSION

Project management today is not valued by the senior executives in many organisations – in these organisations, project management is often considered as "easy and something anyone can do", or "expensive overkill" (Thomas, Delisle et al. 2002). These organisations will continue to experience unacceptably high levels of project failure, and will foster the continuation of the accidental project manager.

This paper has described the accidental project manager and the novice project manager: they are at the same disadvantage, lacking experience and often organisational support in their journey to success. The difference between the two is that the accidental PM has been conscripted and does not intend to stay in the profession; the novice has a desire to stay in the profession. For both types of PM, project success is crucial: project failure will cause them to look elsewhere. This waste of resource is perpetuated by an organisational strategy of crisis management through conscripting individuals to 'accept the poisoned chalice' of managing projects without support. This paper also describes the author's theory of three dimensions of project management and the supporting tool, the *Stakeholder Circle™,* and identifies ways that organisations and the PM profession can support the accidental PM's growth from a 'novice' through to being successful.

Should organisations generally seek to implement the strategies described in this paper, it may mean that the concept of the accidental project manager is just a quirk of a maturing profession – they become an extinct species.

_____

REFERENCES

Boddy, D. and D. Buchanan (1999). Take the Lead: Interpersonal Skills for Project Managers. New York, Prentice Hall.

Bourne, L. and D. Walker (2005). "The Paradox of Project Control." Team Performance Management Journal(Summer 2005).

Bourne, L. and D. H. T. Walker (2003). Tapping into the Power Lines-A 3rd Dimension of Project Management Beyond Leading and Managing. 17th World Congress on Project Management, Moscow, Russia.

Bourne, L. and D. H. T. Walker (2004). "Advancing Project Management in Learning Organizations." The Learning Organization **11**(3): 226 - 243.

Bourne, L. and D. H. T. Walker (2005). "Visualising and Mapping Stakeholder Influence." Management Decision **43**(5): 649 - 660.

Buttrick, R. (2000). The Interactive Project Workbook. London, Prentice Hall.

Crawford, L. (2004). Recognition of Project Management as Strategic Delivery Capability of Organisations. PMI Melbourne Chapter meeting.

Crawford, L. and V. Da Ros (2002). "Politics and the Project Manager." Australian Project Manager **22**(4): 20-21.

KPMG (2005). Global IT Project Management Survey: How committed are you? KPMG International.

Meredith, J. R. and S. J. Mantel Jr (2000). Project Management: a Managerial Approach. New York, John Wiley and Sons.

Mintzberg, H. (1989). Mintzberg on Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organisations. New York, MacMillan.

Murch, R. (2001). Project Management. New Jersey, Prentice Hall.

Peled, A. (2000). "Politicking for Success: the missing skill." Leadership and Organisation Development Journal **21**(1): 20 - 29.

Pinto, J. K. and O. P. Kharbanda (1995). Successful Project Managers. New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold.

PMI (2004). A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. Sylva, NC, USA, Project Management Institute.

Schwalbe, K. (2002). Information Technology Project Management. Boston, Thomson Learning.

Theilen, D. (1999). The 12 Simple Secrets of Microsoft Management. New Tork, McGraw-Hill.

Thomas, J., C. Delisle, et al. (2001). Exploring the "Knowing-Doing" Gap in Project Management, Centre for Innovative Management, Athabasca University.

Thomas, J., C. Delisle, et al. (2002). Selling Project Management to Senior Executives: Framing the Moves that Matter. Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, Project Management Institute.

Turner, J. R. (1999). The Handbook of Project-based Management: Improving the processes for achieving strategic objectives. London, McGraw-Hill.

Turner, R. J. and C. Veil (2002). " Group efficiency improvement: how to liberate energy in project groups." International Journal of Project Management(20): 137-142.

Verzun, E. (1999). The Fast Forward MBA in Project Management. New York, Jonh Wiley and Sons.

Viney, J. (1997). The Culture Wars: How American and Japanese Businesses have outperformed Europe's and why the future will be different. Oxford, UK, Capstone Publishing.

Weaver, P. and L. Bourne (2002). Projects - Fact or Fiction? PMI Conference - Maximising Project Value, Melbourne, PMI Melbourne Chapter.

_____

First Published 14 October 2005 – Augmented and Updated