

Is Project Management a Core Skill and No Longer a Niche Capability?

By Peter Taylor, PMP

Project management is fast becoming the preferred way for companies to get things done. In a global economy, project management makes a company more competitive than other traditional methods of managing work. So for all managers, there is a growing need to understand the dynamics of projects together with the skill and process of project management in order to make the most out their organisation's investments.

The Question

Is Project Management therefore no longer a niche capability, the home of project management office members and external contractors? Is it now a core skill that all executives and senior management need to understand?

In a recent survey conducted by Peter Taylor (www.thelazyprojectmanager.com) through a LinkedIn survey, that very question was asked – "Is Project Management a core skill and no longer a niche capability?" In order to examine what a wider community of business people believe. 347 responded to the survey with results as follows:

The Answer by...

Job Title

The above chart shows the votes cast by job title. Interestingly, it appears that the higher up the organization the voter, the clearer the division between the 'niche' and the 'core' views become. Whereas, the lower the title, the greater the view that PM is 'both a core skill and a niche capability'.

Company Size

By company size, it appears that the small and the large/very large organizations hold a mixed view but that medium companies either believe, or employ, those that act in a PM capacity as 'Both a core skill and a niche capability'. That said, 71% of respondents hailed from organizations at either end of the size scale.

Gender

Gender played no role in results, with an almost identical stance being taken by both male and female groups. It can be noted, however, that the respondents were twice as likely to be men.



Age

The majority of respondents were in the 25 to 54 age range (logical really), and the younger the viewpoint, the more likely the belief that PM is a 'core skill', or the non-belief that it was a 'niche capability'. One would wonder if this as a result of the skills being gathered through the education process for business, and whether project management is being taught as one of the range of business skills?

Job Function

Finally, a view of opinion by job function is provided, which may yield additional insight.

One particular view expressed was that everything - including project management - follows the same evolutionary curve; from being a niche area with early innovators and adopters, moving on to a wider acceptance and adoption, followed by late adopters in mass number, later resulting in moving the topic to become a commodity and possibly, at some future point, into a decline. One must assume that project management does follow this path in some way.

The Argument

Project Management as a discipline is an interesting anomaly. The practice of project management has existed since the well before the Romans began massive projects to reshape their world. However, the science and formalization of project management is relatively recent. Most of the current practices of a well trained project manager have been developed only over the past 70 years. So PM would appear to be on the path to maturity, but leading precisely where forms the basis for this discussion.

For the sake of argument, let's take a final look from each of the three angles:

Project Management will always be a niche capability.

- It's the skill and experience of the individual project manager that makes or breaks a project.
- The need for success means that projects have to be driven by a 'niche capable' project manager.
- General Managers will never have the time, the experience, the training or indeed the skills to manage any project beyond that which is simple in its goals.

- No executive gets promoted because of their project management skills. They get promoted for other reasons. Executives do not need project management skills but instead need project sponsorship and product ownership skills.

Project Management is a core skill.

- If you believe, as most evidence directs us, that we are moving to the "projectification" of society – where work is less and less a line activity and delivered in the majority through projects – then it is vital that all managers now need to understand the dynamics of projects and possess the basic skills and understanding of the process of project management to make the most of their organization's investments.
- All managers need to think in terms of controlled and carefully monitored delivery of outcomes, against a fixed budget and expectations of a quality outcome i.e. as projects.
- Project Management is both a Niche Capability and a Core Skill.
- Project management methodology is a 'core skill' that all managers need to be aware of, but the actual project management activity is still a 'niche capability' that requires additional training and experience in order to be successful.
- Managing a small, simple project is no big deal and most people can do it. Managing a large, complex project with substantial risk, diverse stakeholders, a geographically distributed team, multiple constraints and high stakes is best reserved for real experts.
- The successful business of the 21st century recognizes the value of 'niche' project managers working under a supportive executive that has a foundation of project 'core skills'.

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