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Why is Project Management so White Hot - Cool?

By David L. Pells

Project management is hot! It seems to be one of the hottest topics, and one of the hottest career tracks, in business today. Memberships in project management professional societies, and especially in components of the Project Management Institute (PMI®), continue to grow? Project management certifications and qualifications are in high demand. Project management jobs are plentiful and growing in number. More organizations are seeking qualified project managers and project management professionals than ever before. There are more project management software books, products, services and tools entering the market, and the trend seems to be gaining speed.

So where is this demand coming from? Why is project management so “white hot” popular, or in my dated terminology, why is project management so “cool”?

In my opinion, project management is one of those unique professions, or professional methodology, where organizational and market needs coincide with personal and professional needs to create the perfect career path for many individuals today, both male and female. The reasons include business, economic, political, social and, most of all, personal. Here are some of the reasons that I think this is happening.

Organizational Reasons

Increased project-orientation – I think it is becoming clear that more organizations, industries and markets are becoming more project-oriented. There is even research underway in Europe related to the project orientation of countries and societies (Professor Roland Gareis at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration). Some industries and organizations have always been project oriented, for example in aerospace, construction, defense, energy, oil & gas, transportation, etc. As globalization and global competition have increased, with rapidly changing technologies, product life cycles have fallen rapidly. Projects and project management are now being applied across all industries and economic spectrums. These trends have been reflected in the growing popularity of enterprise project management, project management offices, program and portfolio management, and project management maturity models. More organizations are becoming aware of modern professional project management, which is naturally needed as the number of projects and project-oriented organizations increase.

Projects are important! - Every project is important to someone, usually the sponsor most of all. Some projects are more important than others, and some are important to many people. Some are important for social or economic reasons, some for political reasons. In my opinion, all programs and projects financed with public funds, those sponsored by government, are important. For example, every project to create or improve airports, hospitals, roads, schools and other public facilities are important to those who will use them. Projects related to national defense and security today are very important. Projects that can save lives are important. Projects that protect or improve the environment are important. All of these projects need good project management, which is becoming more apparent to more politicians, taxpayers and stakeholders – and to government and industry executives and officials.

Many projects, and project management, are mission critical! – Some organizations depend on the success of a project for their very survival. It might be a new product, a new plant, a new marketing program, a major contract, a subcontract or a project with high visibility or importance to others. For a hospital, it might be an updated emergency room or new equipment. For a technology company, it might be a new communication system or implementation. For an aerospace or military organization, it might be an actual mission. It might be a demonstration project for a new product line. For some organizations, every project can be mission critical if a disaster occurs (for example, loss of life on a construction project). For those projects and organizations, project management by definition also becomes “mission critical”. The results of project management mistakes can be serious, with great repercussions. In my opinion, the number of mission critical projects is rising. Some might argue that every organization has at least one mission critical project. More qualified professional project management will dramatically reduce the risks on such important projects.

Projects, and good project management, make money! - Organizations are waking up. Better project management can lead to either more income or cost savings. For projects to create new products, new facilities, new capacity or new markets, better project management can bring those products, facilities and capabilities to market faster and more effectively. For all projects that are deemed worthy of investment, better and more professional project management should result in achieving project objectives better, faster and less expensively than otherwise. Project disasters are no longer acceptable. Project failures cost money and resources. Applying proven project management techniques and tools really is a matter of reducing financial risks related to projects. The bottom line is higher efficiency, productivity and profitability.

Projects, and project management, are more visible & subject to scrutiny - More organizations have an increased focus on accountability & governance. For project oriented organizations, or for those with large capital investment projects underway, project management accountability is becoming a bigger issue. Investors, shareholders and boards of directors want, and deserve, to know that those projects are managed properly. Such issues as project management standards and qualifications

are coming into question more often. Such methodologies as earned value management are being required, to ensure better management accountability and reporting. For larger programs and projects, outside project management review committees and panels are beginning to appear for purposes of governance and oversight. The emphasis on better project management as an aspect of better corporate governance is gaining momentum.

Some Personal Reasons

Project Management can lead to good pay, benefits & rewards – According to research conducted by PMI and other organizations, project managers and PM professionals are well paid. For many professionals, assuming project management titles or responsibilities can lead to promotions, pay increases and bonuses (if the project is successful). Some organizations have career tracks and jobs categorized by project management “levels”, primarily associated with experience or qualifications. Some organizations require PM certifications, to be hired or promoted into project management positions. In some industries, project managers represent the most experienced leaders, who often command the highest salaries and benefits. Experienced project managers are being recruited by more organizations worldwide, at higher and more competitive salaries and with other benefits. The value of project management and good project managers is being recognized more widely.

Project Management can be empowering – Project managers generally have power and influence, often more than they realize. When project managers, and project management teams, are delegated enough authority, the power can be both real and highly visible. When one is chosen to work on an important or mission-critical project or program, with real work or responsibilities that can affect the outcome of that project, it can be an empowering experience. If there is proper recognition for those roles and contributions, the process can be exhilarating. But in my experience, project management brings power and influence, which can be exciting and motivational. It is empowering to know how to achieve something, how to bring a team together for a common purpose, and to bring it all off successfully.

Project Management is mentally challenging & requires continuous learning – project managers and PM professionals today are generally well educated and very intelligent, in my opinion. This has been true of every one that I have met in the PM profession over my 30+ years. Modern project management includes a broad set of principles, methodologies, techniques, experiences, concepts and theories than ever before. In addition, it is a well known adage that “every project is different”, that is, every project involves some new or different aspects or conditions. Project management is a never ending learning experience, in fact, requires an open mind, readiness to learn, and commitment to continuous improvement. Project management can also be very difficult, with challenges often including economic and financial issues,

technical and technological requirements, interpersonal and social needs associated with teamwork and leadership, political and business challenges associated with corporate management and customers, and sometimes external stakeholders and public relations. Project management is never dull! It can be intellectually stimulating, exciting and fun, exactly the type of work that many educated and intelligent professionals are seeking.

Project Management can be an adventure – Some projects really are adventures, in the human sense. They might entail traveling to new and exciting places, exploring new and interesting technologies, meeting and working with new and interesting people or organizations, or resolving personal and organizational challenges, both planned and unexpected. I experienced this in the early 1990s, when I was traveling and working in Russia. Not only was each project an adventure, I began to view every trip as an adventure, especially on two large projects with which I was involved in Moscow and St. Petersburg. While each project involved planned activities and meetings, each trip also included the unexpected – new conditions, new issues, new people – all interesting and often entertaining! I can imagine how interesting it must be as a project manager working for EDS, IBM, Nokia, Siemens or other global companies when a project can be located anywhere in the world, with globally dispersed team members, using new technologies, developing new products, sharing objectives and challenges that may well be entirely new and different. What an adventure!

Certainly there are plenty of other reasons for the rising popularity of professional project management, especially for individual organizations and persons. Although project management can be challenging, difficult and stressful, I think it will continue to grow in usage and popularity worldwide for many years to come, for some or all of the reasons mentioned above.

Good luck on your projects!

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