

VIEWPOINT – AUGUST 2007

From Technical Expert to Project Manager

Some technical experts are promoted to project manager's position without considering if they are prepared for that or if they want to be in that position.

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I have met some project management professionals in Europe that were promoted to the job of project manager without going through any selection process in their organizations. I have looked at some big multinational organizations and I observed that some of them think that “*any professional is valid for the project manager job*”. Then they promote senior technical people to the project management position without going through any selection process.

People who have spent some years in the project management profession know that not everyone can be a good project manager. Most of companies worldwide do not spend time informing their people about the meaning of “the project manager job”, the content, the potential issues, challenges and/or difficulties to deal with, to do a good job as project manager. I believe that the main problem is that there is a lack of knowledge about project management in organizations, and then it is not its first priority.

Unfortunately some PM companies assume the next step in the professional career of an individual contributor must be the project manager position, without considering the opinion and/or feedback of the selected candidates. Furthermore they don't give to the individual contributors enough information to judge if they feel attracted or refused by the project management job. I worked for some multinational companies in Europe along my career and I didn't find many

companies being worry about that subject. I experienced many times how people (good individual contributors) were totally frustrated being promoted to project managers. Some technical experts prefer to continue working in his/her position, because they feel very good in a technical job but they don't like dealing with people, they don't communicate well, they don't like conflicts and basically they have a lot of uncertainty about their company's expectations about project management.

Organizations can find some arguments to justify those promotions, for instance one of the most common I found was *"It is a business need. We have more and more projects and we need more project managers to manage it"*. Nobody in those organizations is thinking about the feelings of the professional, who probably does not have enough experience, knowledge and energy; and nobody asked him/her if they want to be a project manager. Furthermore nobody in those organizations is conscious about the business impact (efficiency, effectivity and business results) of putting the wrong person in the wrong position.

As soon the years are over, I discovered the big impact this behavior may have for people in organizations. Nobody likes to be project manager by accident. Project managers must be trained for managing projects. However transition to project manager takes time. Individual contributors need to be explained what are the main differences between working individually and working with others to achieve a common goal.

When somebody works as individual contributor, he/she is responsible for their activities, they must make their technical decisions, they must care of technical aspects and usually belong to a team. When the professional works as project manager, he/she is responsible for the results and achievements of the project team. He/she makes decisions but needs to involve the project team on getting consensus and commitment.

The transition process from individual contributor to project manager takes time. One of the critical factors to be a good project manager is to want to be. Training and experience comes later. This process needs planning and reviews as every learning process in organizations.

Organizations must have a project manager selection process in place. That helps a lot. Giving information to individual contributors about the project management profession should be the first step in that process. I got good results delivering a one day project management workshop for individual contributors in organizations along Europe. At the end of that workshop, I got positive comments like: *“Now I know what is the value of the project manager, I discovered that he/she must do a lot of things and deal with a lot of uncertainty but it is challenging”*. Other people said: *“I really appreciate this training, project management is too much for me”*. There are interesting comments, people need information to make a decision about his/her career path.

Very few things are impossible in the project management field. Everything can be achieved. The transition process needs a lot of passion from the potential project manager, a lot of persistence and patience from the organization in order to give enough time to the candidate to learn and progress. Training, practice and learning on the job are the right ingredients to achieve a good skilled professional in project management.

Important multinational organizations I worked for like HP consider that only training is not enough. All junior project managers must be mentored and coached by senior project managers. Creating project management forums was a another great, effective and efficient way to progress in the project management field in organizations. That type of forums allowed senior and junior project managers to share experiences and to learn each other.

Companies have a great opportunity to seed the field of project management in organizations, defining a “clear career path for project managers” and offering training sessions to individual contributors to help them on decision making about their professional careers. It is very difficult to convince people to do a good job as project manager if they don’t see that the organization recognizes the profession internally.

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