

VIEWPOINT – AUGUST 2007

Project Management is not so “advanced” as many think!

By PM Forum correspondent Paul Giammalvo

In PM WORLD TODAY EDITORIAL, July 2007 David Pells wrote “Why is Project Management so White Hot - Cool?”

Not to date myself, but at one time, Hula Hoops were once “cool”, as were 8 track tapes, Betamax and bra burning.....

So what’s my point? We have to be careful to differentiate between fads and facts, propaganda and proof, sizzle and the steak.....

Project management is certainly not “new”. The taming of fire, invention of the wheel..... the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China, Panama Canal, Empire State Building..... These and many more examples stand as ample evidence that project management is an integral part of mankind’s development and evolution. Stated another way, initiating, planning, executing, controlling and closing of projects seems to be “hard wired” into the human psyche. And somehow, at least up until around the early 1980’s, these projects were all done without benefit of the PMBOK Guide, PRINCE2 or any certifications.

It seems as though it’s only been since PMI’s outstanding marketing efforts in establishing the “brand” of the PMP (1984), Tom Peter’s “Innovation Management” (1992), And Thomas Stewart’s "Project Management-Career Choice of the 90's and Beyond" Fortune Magazine March, 1995 that project management has been widely “recognized” as a stand alone occupation, much less a profession.

Yet let’s do a little bit of a reality check. Despite ~50 years of AACE, CMAA, PMI, APM et al, are we really doing any better at project management than we did prior to the “popularization” of the process?

All one has to do is pick up any newspaper to see examples of project failures..... Ford Motor’s “Everest”, the US Governments blunders <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/news/2005/01/66445> , Australia’s Custom Software <http://www.cio.com.au/index.php?id=723894471&eid=-601> And our Construction colleagues, while supposedly more mature users of project management methodologies as a delivery system, are not a whole lot better than our IT colleagues.

I am currently about to attend a symposium of the Systems Dynamics Society- you know, the people who believe that if a butterfly flaps its wings in the jungles of Malaysia, that it could spawn a hurricane in Florida? While this may well be “pie in the sky”

thinking, having spent my life in project management as both a practitioner and as an academic, I am becoming highly skeptical of the methodologies being espoused not only by PMI, but APM, AACE and other organizations as well, for no other reason that while certainly a good start, as we are finding out from our systems dynamics and systems engineering colleagues, there is NO single methodology or process which can consistently deliver “successful” projects. (defined to be on time, within budget, substantially meeting technical specifications while substantially fulfilling the purpose for which the project was undertaken in the first place)

Because of these observations, I would urge the readers of the PM forum to not be lulled into complacency. Project management is today where medicine was back in the 17th Century. We are experimenting with what works and what doesn't and while we know there are some tools and techniques which work better than others, we still haven't reached the point where we are justified in calling what we do a profession. Before we move forward, we all need to take an introspective look into our track record, step back a little and reflect on who we are, what we are doing and where we want to go in the future, for ultimately, in order to professionalize what we do for a living, we need to be able to show we can produce consistent, predicable, repeatable results.

BR,

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