

Project Management in the hands of the Gen Y Project Manager

ABSTRACT:

INTRODUCTION: What makes a good Project Manager? Common sense, an ability to get things done, inspire a shared vision, possess and demonstrate high level organisational skills and the ability to multi task. Project Management as a discipline is characterised by formal documentation, processes, systems intended to ensure the successful planning, management and delivery of projects against time, cost, quality & customer satisfaction.

Generation Y are perceived to have disregard for, and a desire to challenge tradition. They appear unafraid to question organisational standards, are perceived to be impatient, easily bored and generally lack attention to detail.

What are the implications, if any, for the future of Project Management given that Generation Y is going to be the source for future Project Managers?

METHODS: Discuss and evaluate current ideas and trends and assess what this may mean for companies that invest through projects and project managers.

RESULTS: Possible Project Management trends of based on current research, experience

CONCLUSION: Is the future of “successful” project management dependent on adapting processes and systems to suit the traits and strengths of the Gen Y project manager? or “adapting” through mentoring and support the Gen Y behaviours to the project management processes and systems discipline required?

Having recently had exposure to a number of Gen Y team members on projects and the broader workplace I have found myself wondering what influence and impacts the Gen Y project manager will have on project management practices.

Statistically Gen Y are expected to represent at least 40% of the Australian workforce in little less than 3 years so it is highly likely there will be significant Gen Y project managers emerging in the near term.

Project Management is traditionally described as a discipline – defined by documentation, accepted and recognised repeatable processes that have evolved over time and represented by frameworks and methods such as PMBoK and Prince 2. The profession has seen the growth of specialised Project Management associations (AIPM, PMI), Project Management Training programs and various industry recognised accreditation programs

I have had limited exposure to Gen Y's in the workplace but to date the experience has not been particularly favourable. The Gen Yers I have worked with typify the characteristics often attributed to their generation including unwillingness, hard to manage, and demand rationale behind any request¹

My experience has caused me to ponder what the Gen Y impacts will be on the project management profession in the next few years when they start to take over the reins. I felt compelled to do some research to gain a better understanding and provide me with the opportunity to speculate on the potential impact or influence of the Gen Y Project Manager on Project Management and Project Methodologies as well as try to ascertain what if any would be the implications for their development.

Not dissimilar to my own experiences Sarah Fister Gale² has noted that 'this Generation has a completely different attitude towards workplace culture, loyalty, communication, technology and the confines of the workday. She also states that the latest generation of project managers seems overly self confident in their own tech filled world. But she says, they possess skills that, if fostered, can help the team.'

My research focussed primarily around perceptions of the effective project manager, perceptions and traits of Generation Y and future project management trends.

Defining an effective Project Manager?

In his 1991 article "what do we know about the effective project manager? Petterson³ summarised the opinions of experts through a number of literature reviews and determined that 'first they all seem to agree on the importance of wider management skills: planning, organizational follow up, decision making, team supervision and human aspects. A number of personal characteristics were also identified, among which analytical ability, creativity, vivacity, flexibility, the ability to adapt, stability, energy and persistence recurred the most frequently.'

Gen Y?

Perceptions of Gen Y include: educated, fun loving, tech-savvy, ambitious, ravenous information gatherers, practical and fast learners, they have the ability to adapt to new people, places and circumstances. On the flip side (and more aligned to my recent experiences) they were described as demanding, self interested, lazy, little job loyalty and unresponsive to motivational tactics. They demand freedom and workplace flexibility and lack job loyalty. They are perceived to have disregard for, and a desire to challenge tradition. They are

unafraid to question organisational standards, are perceived to be impatient, easily bored and generally lack attention to detail.

Influencing the effectiveness of the Gen Y Project Manager:

At the conclusion of my research I determined that the effectiveness of the Generation Y Project Manager will be influenced not necessarily by the Gen Y Project Manager themselves but by willingness of the industry and organisations to adapt their approaches to project management development including training programs and Methodologies.

Generation Y are regarded as the most highly educated generation. They have grown up with unlimited access to information via the Internet. They demand to be challenged and although, not always keen to listen, are willing to experiment. According to one Generation Y'er, "[we] rarely pick up the instruction pack... [and] we tend to learn things ourselves, to experiment with new technology until we get it right, and to build by touch rather than tutorial."⁴

I have no doubt the average technically savvy Gen Y project manager will not experience difficulties in picking up and using project management tools and processes but they are more likely to struggle with the less prescriptive elements of the role including managing stakeholders team work, team building and the art of face to face communication. Their exposure to communication via technology – text, email, facebook and twitter – means they are less likely to use direct communication methods. I believe there will be less demand for teaching the use of methodologies and more demand for teaching and exposing the Gen Y project manager to the human factors key to being an effective project manager.

The other area that I believe will be significantly impacted will be the level of prescription within project management methodologies. The Gen Y'ers are less likely to thrive working within heavily prescribed practices and process and are more likely to be accepting of high level frameworks that provide guidance and tolerances but allow them the freedom to experiment and use their creativity.

Conclusion

Gen Y will have the skills required to be a technically competent project manager but to be effective they will need to build on their interpersonal and communication skills.

My top tips to assist with developing an effective Gen Y Project Manager are:

- Focus development on Face to Face communications.
- Assist them to understand the value of continuous improvement within a control framework.
- Focus on the principles of successful project management rather than the prescribed application of PM processes.
- Ensure any deviation from agreed practice is called to account and justified.

¹ De Kort, L; Generations at Work: An Introduction to the Generation Mix in the Australian Workplace, Australian Institute of Project Management (2004)

² Fister Gale S; 'Bridging the Gap'; PM Network (March 2007) 26-31;

³ Petterson, N; 'What do we know about the Effective Project Manager?' Project Management (1991)

⁴ Windham, C. Father Google & Mother IM: Confessions of a Net Gen Learner. EDUCAUSE Review, 40, 5 (September/October 2005), 43-58.)