

Graduates and Project Management

One of the lasting memories of my work experience stint at a regional council as part of my Civil Engineering degree was how useless I felt. The disconnect between what the council needed me to do, and the skills/experience I had obtained through my undergraduate studies, was significant. I still remember the level of frustration felt by both myself and my supervisor at the council. Fast forward 25 years, I now find myself not only an employer of graduates but also a University lecturer. Has much changed over this time, how should we approach today's graduates?

1. Expectations mismatch

Industry still expects graduate students to leave university ready to work, with demonstrated learning skills and some applied skills in and around the profession for which they are applying. The reality is most University students graduate with extensive "pure" knowledge but limited "applied" knowledge. It can be argued the focus of University education is to create a "thinker" rather than a "doer". The result is industry needs to take a broader view of graduate capability and modify their short term expectations.

As an employer who is heavily exposed to post graduate studies, we have minimal expectations on graduate's ability to "do". Our recruitment process focuses on communication skills, ambition and overall astuteness. We require a high standard of written and oral skills and assume a high level of general IT skill. We seek people with general work experience (part time jobs while at University, not necessarily related to their studies) to ensure people have an understanding of the nature of work. Sometimes, people who undertake Post Graduate studies directly after their Under Graduate studies lack an understanding of the nature of work.

2. What to look for

The 2002 "Employability Skills for the Future" report, see attached, identifies both the personal attributes and generic skills, which is more than appropriate for employing graduates into a Project Management graduate program. While some can be assessed through discussion with referees, others will need to be assessed through interviewing. Some attributes will only be able to be assessed in the longer term. Employers must realise that there will be successes and failures in a Graduate program, some graduates will not work out. Some attributes are very difficult to change so care is needed in recruitment.

Skills are easier to assess. Open questions, both written and verbal, together with a challenging exercise/test may be quite effective. An application process which requires genuine thought and written responses is highly recommended.

3. The impact of Gen Y

Speaking of expectations, there is a lot written about the expectations of Generation Y when it comes to the workplace. The previous approach of "doing your time" and proving yourself prior to promotion is no longer as attractive. Even holding young people beyond two years is a major challenge for many organisations. Multi tasking, social networking, living at home longer and "never fail" education, are all factors that make working with Generation Y challenging. The reality is most employers and most coach/mentors will be Generation X or Baby Boomers, so will struggle to relate on a number of levels.

As an employer, we consider the problem ours, not theirs. We need to adapt to being more flexible, more connected and more open to change. Assuming we are employing graduates

for their thinking skills, we must accept that they will find different, and often better, ways of doing things. The advent of collaboration tools within Project Management is an example of this innovation, as are discussion forums, blogs, wikis, social networking sites and the like. The other aspect of Generation Y we have embraced is expecting that people will not stay for the long term. Rather than structuring a program around benefits to our organisation at the end of the program, we have structured the program around benefits along the way. In this way both the graduates and our organisation can “enjoy the journey” rather than focus on the destination. We expect our graduates to leave at the end of the program, although we would obviously be delighted if they stayed.

4. Learning from the past

It would be foolish to ignore what has worked well in the past. In the trade sector apprenticeships are becoming more popular after several years of neglect. The basic apprenticeship model has proven effective and has withstood the test of time. Young people are employed in a program lasting up to four years, with tangible accreditation at the end, and a blend of on the job and formal classroom training along the way. Their income stays relatively low but is offset in theory by the training they receive. Employers benefit through a low cost resource, as well as the satisfaction of helping a young person through the passing on of knowledge and skill.

While recognising it would not be popular to call a graduate program an apprenticeship, we have adopted some of the basic aspects of an apprenticeship in our program. We have a Graduate Project Management program which spans four years, with interim accreditation after two years. We have employed primarily on the basis of soft skills with graduates having either Business or IT degrees, with one graduate even having completed Law/Psychology. Graduates receive a combination of hands on and instructor led training, with assigned mentor/coaches from day one. The pay scale starts low but rapidly increases as target skills are demonstrated. Along the way graduates do hands on work, supporting Project Managers with increasing responsibility as they work more and more independently. The program culminates in formal Project Management accreditation, either RegPM or PMP after the graduates have undertaken the role as “the Project Manager” on several small or non complex projects.

One of the primary benefits of the Graduate program is the ability to work with a fresh mind, untainted by poor practice. For this reason we avoid people with one or more years of actual work experience in a related field.

5. A focus on competencies

Although Graduates enter the program without us having an expectation of specific skills or experience, realistically during recruitment we are looking for some pre-existing skills:

- Written communication skills
- Verbal communication skills
- Broad IT skills (e.g. Office, Internet, Email etc)
- General knowledge – either IT or Business

Our recruitment process assesses general aptitude and we try to assess overall astuteness and ambition. Assuming we find the right people, the program then is structured around specific skill and knowledge gaps. Having run the program several times now, we have a mature target list of skills and knowledge people should have by the end of each year. Through formal quarterly reviews, together with fortnightly catch-ups and instructor led training, the skill gap list is used as the basis for training and development plans. Meanwhile people fulfil support roles on major projects which reinforces skills as well as providing exposure to people interaction, politics and problems.

Embracing the concept that “one day they will leave”, we encourage graduates to gain external accreditation wherever possible. Throughout the journey graduates will be accredited for PRINCE2, for Planning/Scheduling capability (PMI SP) and as a Project Manager (RegPM or PMP). We try to instil the notion that people are responsible for their own professional development and must continue to learn beyond the program.

6. Supplemented by knowledge

We realise there is no substitute for experience. Graduates will, through their very nature, lack experience. The role of the coach/mentor is to act as a sounding board, to review outputs and more importantly to stay close enough to the graduates to spot issues before they arise. Rather than stop the graduate making a mistake, the coach/mentor must be involved enough to be able to minimise the impact and allow the graduate to learn. The coach/mentor will need to have the time and ideally be co-located to fulfil this role.

A second source of supplemented knowledge is reading and research. Our focus is on IT Project Managers so for us the reading is around IT and systems development, business generally and also industry innovation. Depending on the graduate’s degree, the focus of reading will vary, again we have a target list of awareness topics.

As graduates experience life on a large project, they will be exposed to good leaders and not so good leaders, conflict, politics, business change, re-organisations and other complexities faced by Project Managers. As they become more comfortable “doing” we start working with them to become more aware of Emotional intelligence and broader leadership qualities.

7. Advice for University students

When lecturing (at Post Graduate level) students regularly ask for my advice relating to “getting a job” once they graduate. Thinking through a number of factors, I’d summarise my advice as follows:

- Stepping stones – Separate the ultimate job from the stepping stone jobs. With Project Management it is virtually impossible to get a Project Manager job straight out of university.
- Demand/supply – Basic economic theory applies to the job market. Consider stepping stone jobs for which there is a high demand. Often the less glamorous jobs will be easier to win as there will be less people wanting them. Good examples in IT include Technical document writing, testing, project office/project support.
- Connections – Melbourne in particular works on a “who you know” basis, therefore get connected with people even while you are at university and stay connected. It takes effort. For international students in particular, extend connections beyond your own cultural groups.
- Work – While at University, and even if you don’t need the money, get a job. Gain an appreciation of the nature of work as well as an understanding of workplace relationships. For international students in particular, work provides the opportunity to improve communication skills.
- Assimilate – The current workplace is dominated by Generation X. While it might be cool with Generation Y to have tattoos/piercings, be semi shaven, to use abbreviations and emoticons, be 10 minutes late and communicate via SMS, these are not the norms of recruiters or managers. Human nature is such that there is a tendency to select similar people to oneself. So initially at least, adopt employers norms and assimilate.

8. Final words

The graduate programs have been one of the most successful initiatives in our business over the last four years. The program provides a win/win scenario for everyone involved:

- Graduates get a fast tracked career with tangible accreditation
- We get fun, innovative, low cost resources
- Our customers get a blended engagement with the benefit of cost effective contract resources, without the quality concerns

About the author

Martin Vaughan (AIPM MPD) is the Managing Director of Core Consulting Group (www.coreconsulting.com.au), a Melbourne based consulting business specialising in Planning/Scheduling, Estimating/Cost Management and PMOs. Martin also lectures in IT Project Management at the University of Melbourne and is an active member of the AIPM PMO Special Interest Group.

Appendix – Employability Skills for the Future report

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/other_publications/

The 2002 “Employability Skills for the Future” report, commissioned by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), released by the former Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) together with the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), was in response to a need to define employability skills.

The Employability skills framework identified the following personal attributes:

- loyalty
- commitment
- honesty and integrity
- enthusiasm
- reliability
- personal presentation
- commonsense
- positive self-esteem
- sense of humour
- balanced attitude to work and home life
- ability to deal with pressure
- motivation
- adaptability

The Employability skills framework identified the following skills:

- communication skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- team work skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes;
- problem-solving skills that contribute to productive outcomes
- initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes
- planning and organising skills that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- self-management skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
- learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- technology skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks