

Project Management Minitrack

Focus: Leveraging Resources for Competitive Advantage

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The business environment is quite different from what it used to be. Technologies, especially computers and communications, have radically changed the workplace and transformed our global economy with an orientation toward service and knowledge work, and a higher mobility of resources, skills, processes, and technology itself. In a concomitant change, new project management techniques have evolved which are often better integrated with business processes, offering more sophisticated capabilities for project tracking and controlling in culturally-diverse environments that contain a broad spectrum of contemporary challenges. Such challenges include time-to-market pressures, accelerating technologies, pressures for innovation, resource limitations, technical complexities, social and ethical issues, operational dynamics, risk and uncertainty.

While there is little argument among business leaders that project management provides an important toolset for implementing multidisciplinary ventures, ranging from new product-, service- and process-development initiatives, to acquisitions and foreign assistance programs, there is yet a growing sense of disappointment and frustration that not all techniques work equally well, nor are all equally applicable to all projects.

Leveraging company resources and positioning for speed and innovative performance requires more than just the application of modern project management tools and techniques, but also the keen understanding of the organizational infrastructure and the complex social, technical and economic issues that determine the culture and value system of the enterprises.

As a result, the focus of project management has shifted over the past decades from simply tracking schedule and budget data, to the integration of human factors and organizational interfaces into the project management process. The new generation of project leaders must deal effectively with the new challenges and realities of today's business environment, which include highly complex sets of deliverables, as well as demanding timing, environmental, social, political, regulatory and technological factors. Working effectively in such an intricate environment requires new skills in both project administration and leadership, especially for complex, technology-based and R&D-oriented projects, that rely to an increasing extent on innovation, cross-functional teamwork and decision-making, intricate multi-company alliances and highly complex forms of work integration. Project success often depends to a considerable extent on member-generated performance norms and work processes, rather than supervision, policies and procedures.

The six papers collected in this minitrack provide a small sample of field research that spans across a wide spectrum of issues and best practices that address the challenges of project managers' in today's complex business environment.

The first paper, "Information Technology Management Roles: A Comparison of IT Executives and IT Project Managers" by Jan Terje Karlsen, Petter Gottschalk and Erling S. Andersen examines the leadership roles and challenges of project vs. functional managers in information technology intensive environments. The paper provides a useful insight into the intricacies of today's multi-cultural project environment and makes suggestions for gaining effective cross-functional support.

These cultural differences must be clearly understood for effective interdisciplinary teamwork, a topic explored by Tom L. Roberts, Jr., Paul H. Cheney and Paul D. Sweeney in their paper entitled "Group Interaction Constructs for Hands-On LAN Projects: An Initial Investigation." The authors discuss the various factors that affect team dynamics and efficiency in IT project environments, an area that is further discussed by Piet M.A. Ribbers and Klaus-Clemens Schoo in their paper "Designing Complex Software Implementation Programs."

Yet another challenge in our fast changing world of business is the acceleration of product developments. This area is being addressed from various perspectives in three field studies which conclude the Project Management Minitrack: (1) "An Enterprise Internet Content Implementation Methodology and Case Study" by Joseph Weiss and Aman Datta; (2) "A Tentative Framework for Managing Software Product Development in Small Companies" by Kristian Rautianen, Jari Vanhanen, Casper Lassenius; and (3) "An Organizational Decision Support Approach to R&D Project Selection" by Qija Tian, Jian Ma, Cleve J. Liang, Ron C. Kwok, Ou Liu and Quan Zhang.

Taken together, these field studies suggests, that effective project management in today's challenging business environment requires both, appropriate tools and processes, as well as sophisticated people skills. Successful project leaders are social architects who understand the interaction of organizational and behavioral variables, and can foster a climate of active participation, minimal dysfunctional conflict and effective communication. They also build alliances with support organizations and upper management to assure organizational visibility, priority and resource availability throughout the project life cycle.