

Research article

# THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PATH OF A PROJECT MANAGER

A professional development path describes how and why someone enters into a profession and how that person develops as a professional over time. Different forces influence the development of a professional. For instance: personality & vocational interest, education & training, personal experience & self-reflection, formal guidelines & procedures and mentoring & socialization.

Little is known about the professional development paths of project managers. Most research on the development of project managers is focused on formal education programs, but in reality much learning occurs on the job. In order to build our understanding of the development of project managers we interviewed 31 experienced project managers in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Havermans, Savelsbergh, Storm and Broekema; 2014). In these interviews we focused mainly on the learning experiences that these project managers themselves indicate as having an important role in shaping the way they think and act in their role as project managers.

In this short research article we will highlight some of the lessons we learned from the research and their practical implications. For the theoretical and methodological foundations and more detailed understanding of the research please refer to our forthcoming PMI research report. This research was sponsored by PMI.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

A majority of the interviewed project managers rolled in to the profession, rather than explicitly trying to work towards the role of project manager. Many did not formally apply for the job but were asked to take on some of the responsibilities or took these responsibilities on their own initiative. As they did so they started to like these responsibilities and became aware that they fitted their abilities and vocational interests. The major vocational interest of the project managers in our sample is Enterprising. Meaning that they are attracted to assertive and leadership oriented work activities. Other vocational interests, such as Social, Creative or Investigative, are hardly represented. It is often noticed that project management is still a profession dominated by males. Our results indicate that there is another, perhaps more influential, one-sidedness: the dominance of the results oriented professional. With the wide and growing variety of projects and complexity of their environments, it might



AUTHORS

PETER STORM, KENNIS & CO, peter@kennisenco.nl

LISELORE HAVERMANS, vu university amsterdam, l.a.havermans@vu.nl

CHANTAL SAVELSBERGH, open university of the netherlands

HENK BROEKEMA, advanced people strategies ltd

be important to stimulate the development of a wide variety of project managers bringing with them a variety of vocational interests.

'Learning by doing' seems to be the dominant way of developing oneself as a project manager. Most of the important learning experiences mentioned by our interviewees were initiated with a goal of learning from it by either the project manager themselves or anyone in their environment, but just happened. This way of learning by project managers is a lonely business as it turns out that a majority of all lessons learned is gained by self-reflection, not by sharing experiences among colleagues or by guidance from an experienced senior. Direct support from human resource management in the professional development of project managers seems to be seriously lacking, as they are almost never mentioned in a role of making learning experiences possible or supporting learning from those experiences.

The results of our investigation also shows that project managers tend to learn about different themes from their first important learning experience as a project manager, than from later learning experiences. From their first learning experience, project managers tend to gain some *insight in practice*, seeing for themselves how broad the role can be, and *self-insight*, finding out that they enjoy project management work. From later learning experiences project managers tend to gain mainly *self-efficacy*, learning to have faith in themselves as project managers, become *more people oriented*, respecting and acknowledging others in their work, and develop a *broader view of their role*, seeing it in a bigger picture and looking ahead. Experiences concerning professional knowledge gained through courses and accreditation doesn't seem to play a major role in the development of project managers from their own perspective.

#### WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS?

Although this is an explorative study with a limited sample, we already point to several implications of our current results for practice.

Project managers currently develop themselves mostly by themselves. As this is a haphazard process in which coincidence plays a major role our recommendation to project managers are:

- To reflect on your day-to-day experiences and assess what you have learned from them in terms of competences and values.
- Discuss your conclusions with your resource manager and draw joint conclusions on how the synergy

between your (actual) development path and your (more formal) career path can be increased.

- To select deliberate development goals for each of your projects and evaluate which new insights you aim for and which you gained and make them explicit to yourself and others.
- To join a project managers community within your company to learn and exchange experiences and insights and develop new PM knowledge.

Our recommendations to resource managers of project managers are:

- To assign project managers to projects based on deliberate development goals, as we currently see that assigning people on the basis of availability and proven skills limits their development.
- To create a regular habit of 'collective reflection' and use incidents as triggers for learning.
- To debrief a project with project managers not only on project results and processes but also on personal lessons learned.

And, as the (self) selection of project managers appears to depend largely on their personality and the vocational interest, our recommendations to human resource managers are:

- To search for people with different vocational interests in order to broaden the base of potential project managers.
- To explicitly align the career paths of project managers with their development paths.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

Now that we have conducted this initial study to explore the development paths of project managers, we are very interested in diving into this area even further. Our experience from presenting these results to project managers and project management researchers nationally and internationally is that these results are recognized and resonate with a wider audience. We are very interested to hear to what extent you recognize our results or are surprised by them and the possibilities you see for developing future research in this area that can inform both research and practice centered around the development of project managers.

#### REFERENCE

Havermans, L., Savelsbergh, C., Storm, P. and Broekema, H. (Forthcoming). *Project manager development paths: What project managers learn from their experiences and what influences their learning*, research report, PMI.