

The Evolution of Project Management

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Project managers have been known as *prima donnas*: Dynamic, assertive people who understood the art of sticking to tight schedules and budgets. While projects still attract energetic people who like challenges and diverse work experiences, the *prima donna* status of project managers is gradually changing and their role demystified as project management becomes an established vocation and as companies increasingly develop standardized methodologies for managing projects.

When the term ‘project management’ was coined in the 1950s the emphasis was entirely on scheduling, budgeting and control. In 1981 when, as a young engineering manager, I first studied project management at the University of Pretoria, the emphasis was still to a large extent on scheduling, budgeting, control and project information systems (that ran on main-frame computers).

While scheduling, cost estimating and control remain crucially important, project management has been redefined to include subject matter from a wide range of fields such as operations management, systems thinking, new product development, risk management, the quality movement, organizational dynamics, industrial psychology and various other aspects of commercial management. In the 1990s the University of Pretoria realized that, as a large, multi-disciplinary institution, it was excellently positioned to teach the multi-disciplinary field of project management and also to contribute towards its development by means of research. This has led to the University of Pretoria being the first (and so far the only) university on the African continent with a masters’ programme in project management accredited by the USA Project Management Institute (PMI).

In the highly specialized modern world, project management is normally a second field of interest. The finest project managers all specialize in managing projects within a specific field (such as construction, new product development, social work or IT – often the project manager’s first field of study). While most of the continuing education in project management at the University of Pretoria is suitable to people from all disciplines, the masters’ degree programme is aimed specifically at engineers and scientists.

In the early days of project management, the focus was on the planning and execution of an individual project. One current emphasis is on linking multiple projects with corporate strategies to enhance corporate competitiveness. This has led to projects being viewed as investments that form part of portfolios of projects. Organizations handling multiple projects need to make complex decisions to structure portfolios and to allocate resources to the individual projects, based on several criteria that include the strategic relevance and relative priority of each project. Computer systems have become essential in supporting these decisions. Despite some excellent developments in IT systems, software alone does not provide the ultimate answer to managing multiple projects – people skilled in the science and art of project management will always be required to make decisions.

With project management firmly established as a way of improving competitiveness, and with a vibrant interest of corporations in the field, qualifications in project management have become highly valued investments.

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