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What Every IT Manager Needs To Know About Project Management

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Rhané Thomas, Global Knowledge Instructor

Introduction

The IT Manager, or any functional manager, and the Project Manager have a lot in common. Both work to achieve organizational goals by directing the activities of people. They employ many of the same knowledge sets, skills, abilities and personal traits to plan, organize, staff, direct and control their teams, including:

- Strong leadership and interpersonal skills
- Ability to manage people, time and resources
- Ability to develop people
- Excellent communication and presentation skills
- Good organizational and problem solving abilities
- Good negotiation, conflict resolution and decision making skills
- Talent to handle clients
- Knowledge/awareness of the requirements of the relevant legislation and regulations
- Honesty and integrity

Differences between IT Managers and Project Managers

Although most managers have similar skills sets, there are some differences between the roles of IT Managers and Project Managers. The main difference is one of focus. The IT Manager is responsible for an ongoing program of IT services, while the Project Manager's accountability and authority last only for the life of the project. In fact, it is the time-limited nature of projects that makes the role of Project Manager so important.

Despite such similarities and differences, it is important for the IT Manager to know the basics of formalized project management. Why? Because every organization needs to be able to implement change and almost all important changes are defined or implemented through project teams. Does everyone in the organization (or in IT) need to know project management, or is it safe to leave it in the hands of a highly trained few? Spread the knowledge around!

Project Teams

Project teams are frequently cross-functional, with members from many parts of the organization. Project teams must be able to interact successfully with people throughout the organization in order to plan and complete the project. Everyone in the organization will be affected by what the project teams do, so the more members of the organization understand about project management, the better they will be able to support, guide, and interact with the project team.

Many organizations have trained Project Managers or a Project Management Offices. However, IT Managers without these resources can still benefit from project management frameworks that describe best practices such as the Project Management Institute's PMBOK® (Project Management Book of Knowledge) and the United Kingdom government's PRINCE2 (PRojects IN Controlled Environments). It is not necessary or possible for everyone in an organization to be project management professionals, but that doesn't mean that they should be ignorant of the essentials of project management. The important thing for the entire organization is to select an approach to managing projects and socialize it in the organization.

Projects

The Need for Change

Let's talk a little more about projects themselves. We've said that change is the reason for projects. Changes in the business are naturally reflected, or anticipated, in the technology supporting the business. We agree on where they come from, but what is a project? A project is a one-time, multitask job with clearly defined starting and ending dates, a specific scope of work to be performed, a budget, and a specified goal or outcome to be achieved. You can easily understand that the amount of time, energy and focus required to get a project done would place an unacceptable burden on any IT manager, if added to current responsibilities. Enter the project team.

The Project Manager

When the need for a change is identified, the search is on for a Project Manager. Someone is needed to focus on the initiation, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing the work of the project. However, the Project Manager does not perform the activities that make up the project; this is the purpose of the project team. The IT Manager supports the project by providing staff resources and by lending authority to the Project Manager. Unlike IT Managers, who have positional authority, Project Managers derive their authority from the project charter. This can lead to confusion among team members when normal workload and project activities conflict. The IT Manager can facilitate project success by adjusting workloads and priorities to free up project team members.

The Project Process

The PMBOK® defines Project Management as "the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements." Simply stated, it is a process-oriented approach to defining, doing and measuring the work required to get the desired outcome. It is in the familiarity and facility with the tools and techniques of formal project management where the Project Manager diverges from other managers in the organization. The professional Project Manager has devoted significant time and effort to learning and applying the best practices appropriately, and the ability to match the framework to the organizational style and culture is the result of both training and experience.

Summary

What every IT Manager needs to know about Project Management is that there are best practices that, when socialized into an organization, can greatly enhance the success of projects. Project Management is a serious, professional field of interest with its own practices and attainments. Adopting Project Management will make the work of effectively managing change in the IT environment easier and more consistent. It is important to remember that any framework or tool is only as good as the people who use it. Picking a framework and tools that suit your organizational culture, familiarizing the entire organization with the chosen framework, and training staff in the use of and reasons for the tools can make the handling of changes more consistent, efficient and successful. The IT Manager and the Project Manager are not at odds. The Project Manager's ability to focus knowledge, skills, tools and techniques on the temporary endeavor frees the IT Manager to focus on keeping the wheels of commerce turning.

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About the Author

Rhané Thomas is a Senior Consultant with Public Sector Consultants, Inc., in Sacramento, California. Rhané began consulting after a long and varied career in public service as a programs analyst, standup trainer, and project manager. In her second career, Rhané writes and blogs on business topics, as well as developing and delivering business training content.