

Projects and personalities: A framework for individualising project management career development in the construction industry

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Abstract

The widespread use of project management across the construction industry has had a significant impact on management and management structures. Within this context, promotions based on traditional management models are no longer advisable for career development and ultimately business performance. This paper seeks to provide an additional route for competency identification and individualised career development founded on a project management based management model for the UK construction industry that recognises required shift in strategic awareness. A meta-list competency model was established via the analysis of relevant published models against a conceptual project management model. The meta-list was then used to analyse the MBTI® type descriptions for the generation of a theoretical career development framework that incorporates the impact of mental preference on performance, job satisfaction and succession planning. In doing so, it recognises the variance in strategic mentality and provides a practical approach to competency identification that demonstrates the potential link between project role and mental preference. From this, organisations within the construction industry now have an additional route for individualised and impartial gap identification and succession planning in their programmes.

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1. Introduction

The complexity of today's project environments has created an even greater need to ensure that construction organisations have effective career development programmes to fill project management roles with the 'right' people for successful delivery. To meet this need, organisations have looked to supplement established programmes with impartial methods to profiling employee characteristics. Currently lacking from these approaches is a means to reflect both the structural changes incurred through management by projects and the underlying principles of workplace competency. This paper seeks to highlight the impact of the revised project management based model, identify the competencies required by organisational project management within the UK construction industry and provide a framework which promotes improved career development by linking individual

'mental preference' to competency identification, performance, job satisfaction and succession planning.

Research of this kind, specific to the construction sector, is needed and timely due to the risk associated with construction projects and their ability to cause organisation-wide collapse (Kangari, 1988) exacerbated by increases in complexity, globalisation and technology. To help to manage this risk, widespread change in the sector's approach to career development of practitioners operating outside of the traditional hierarchy (Pinto and Kharbanda, 1995) and the guidance for improving employee understanding beyond the limits of past performance is imperative.

The first part of the paper concentrates on the impacts of the extensive use of project management and the resulting evolution of the management model. Construction industry specific, general management and project management competence/competency

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models are then considered based on this model to establish competency profiles for the generation of a theoretical career development framework. The framework’s aim is to provide the link between individual competency, role and ultimately job satisfaction and performance. The scope of this work is limited to the development of a conceptual model and a theoretical framework for project management practitioners in the UK construction industry and comments in general on the workforce composition and structure traditionally recognised in this industry. It does not provide empirical validation but seeks to comment on the impact of new forms of management on career development practice.

2. Project management as the new management model

This section details the changes to the traditional management model based on the impact of organisational project management. It is not the intent of this work to criticise variations on traditional management theory or to allude that all UK construction organisations follow an abstract of Weber’s (1947) bureaucratic structure. The intent is simply to demonstrate via a simplification of a common scalar hierarchy, as identified by Spencer and Spencer (1993), the advent of another post-bureaucratic shift with an even greater emphasis on competencies (Cunneen, 2008) for achieving success.

The traditional management model can be described as consisting of three levels: first line supervisors and managers, middle managers and the executive (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). In many organisations it is this hierarchal line of authority that is predominant (Mintzberg, 1998; Naoum, 2001), even with the acknowledgement of varying forms of succession specialisation and organisational structure. Munns and Bjeirmi (1996) suggest that project management has surpassed this traditional model of management in its effectiveness and efficiency for handling the complexity of today’s organisational environments. Therefore, project based organisations must work to renounce the traditional model and consider the wider implications of project management as a legitimate, effective and perhaps dominant management model (Pant and Baroudi, 2008; Munns and Bjeirmi, 1996; Winter et al., 2006). This must be done in a way which recognises the appreciable shift which has occurred; from increasing organisational accountability to strategic awareness brought on by the advent of organisational project management, project-based modes of organising or ‘managing by projects’ coupled with the philosophy of programme management. The need for

an adapted and stand-alone model is underpinned by the strategic transition from output delivery to benefits realisation to organisations as links in complex networks. Management by projects blurs the line between specialisation and authority, creating the need for a renewed profile that considers that the ‘thinkers’ may also be the ‘doers’. Thus, the project management community needs to further the recommendations of those such as Ashkenas et al. (2002) and reshape the existing boundaries to move talent where it is most needed.

Through consideration of the work of Pellegrinelli (1997) in defining sponsor and programme roles and that of Holzle (2010) commenting on the decreasing need for upward-oriented promotion and pure managers. The model suggested by Holzle (2010) details the project manager’s career path from project manager to director and though it maintains the traditional successive nature the need for different competencies between varying strategic project responsibilities is argued. The impact of multi-project environments and project vs. programme management theory needs to be reflected in a separation by strategic awareness over accountability and experience. Fig. 1 illustrates a simplified conceptual model detailing how Holzle’s model (2010) can be adapted to mirror these changes. For later purposes, the ‘supervisor’ level was maintained to denote the individual contributors who play a vital role in succession planning.

The primary implication of the non-successive model is the substitution of strategic awareness over organisational accountability, reinforcing the idea that although the elements of the model may still be somewhat successive due to knowledge requirements, they are not prerequisite. For example, based on action research in a major telecommunications Pellegrinelli (1997) concluded that the transition from project to programme management level should not be viewed as a natural progression. This seems to imply that a fundamental change in strategic perspective is fitting. Hence a reasonable implication is that advancement between elements based purely on experience or performance within another element must be revisited, in particular for any inference to the limitations of competency or cognitive processes this may hold.

In brief, this section shows a simplified version of the non-successive that should supersede the traditional model in project-oriented organisations. This change has implications for the career development of individuals working in these organisations within the construction industry. If promotion is based on seniority or ability (Cunneen, 2008) but roles are not

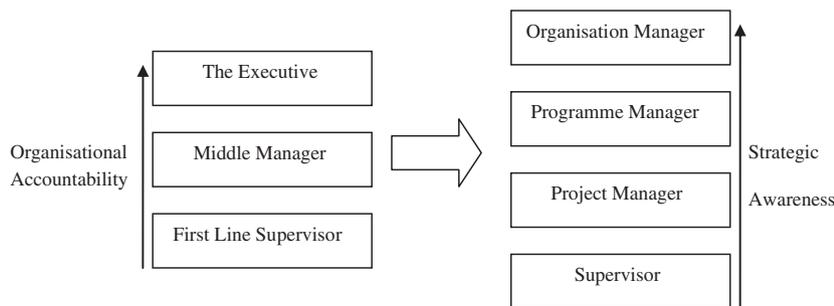


Fig. 1. Non-successive project management model.

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