

From outpost to outback: project career paths in Australia

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Abstract

With the growth in project management as a form of work organisation in many sectors of the economy has come the significant rise in the number of project managers and project team members. This change in work organisation brings issues in forging career paths and determining career support in work situations that are often dynamic, short lived and intense. In the relatively small but substantially robust Australian economy, a unique labour market and the tyranny of distance bring their own difficulties. Innovative and collaborative project structures and increasing prevalence of contract work provide both challenges and opportunities for new career pathways in many industries. A growing percentage of Australia's workforce is employed in project-based or project-oriented organisations, leading to the claim that Australia is a project-based economy. This provided a context for our research into the career paths and the issues of career management for project managers working in a project based economy. Using in-depth interviews with project managers from three industry areas we found generational and gender differences in experiences of work, workplace support and mentoring for career development. For a continued strong performance in this economy, organisations that employ project personnel will need to consider how they will ensure the supply of high quality project professionals into the future.

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1. Introduction

Project management is a growing area of employment in many industries with project management knowledge and skills now required by a broad range of professionals and tradespeople in order to work in today's organisations. Hodgson (2004) suggests that the sharp increase in the number of members of the project management profession has been linked to changing

organisation forms. The prevalence of 'temporary organisations' has grown (Bredin and Söderlund, 2011; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Turner and Müller, 2003) and as Cicmil and Hodgson (2006) point out, 'project management continues to expand as knowledge-intensive firms increasingly based on project models' are predicted to be the organisational form of the future. With more organisations adopting project management approaches to conduct their business, the demand for project managers (Crawford, 2005) and project team members is increasing sharply. Indeed, as Lindgren and Packendorff (2006) acknowledge, project management has 'become a common form of work organisation in all sectors of the economy'.

Indicative of this projectisation is the growth in membership of project management professional associations. The International Project Management Association (IPMA, 2013) has over

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55 member associations worldwide and the Project Management Institute (PMI, 2013) claims to be one of the world's largest professional membership associations, with half a million members and credential holders in more than 185 countries. The Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) is also experiencing large increases in membership (www.aipm.com.au). The PMI points out that as the number of projects increases, the pool of qualified project personnel is not keeping pace. At the same time, it is predicted that project work will take different shapes and forms in the future with White (www.ipma.ch, 2011) suggesting that project professionals will be 'working in the virtual world by 2020'.

Increasing participation of females across all areas of the workforce presents another aspect of change to be considered in the context of project oriented work. It raises questions concerning the extent to which project-dependent industries are implementing workplace practices to support diversity, inclusivity and equity. By doing so, the shortfalls currently predicted may be alleviated and, importantly, at the same time women will increasingly find career paths within the project management profession both welcoming and rewarding.

In project settings human resource (HR) departments tend not to intervene in the project manager/employee relationship (Bredin and Söderlund, 2011) on issues such as hours of work and applying the organisation-wide work/life balance policies. Clark and Colling (2005) found that in engineering organisations there was the potential for 'highly specific project management practices' to constrain the impact of HR strategies. Legault (2005) saw this situation as providing project managers with considerable latitude in relation to decision-making power. This, Legault (2005) points out, has the potential to lead to organisational policies not being fully implemented or applied as intended. Some argue that this can lead to project team members being denied their workplace rights (Legault, 2005) and working extremely long hours or working through weekends, possibly as a result of their enthusiasm for bringing the project to a successful completion such as within the performing arts (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006). Indeed Clark and Colling (2005) cite Scase's investigation into the possible link between project management and the UK's long-hour culture. Huemann et al. (2007) identified the need for further research into HR in project-oriented organisations to ensure the well-being and ethical treatment of employees. While the project management profession demands working conditions which do not fit well with access to work arrangements introduced in Australia through the Fair Work Act in 2009, careers in project management may prove more difficult to pursue for people with family responsibilities.

This paper explores generational and gender differences in experiences of work, workplace support and mentoring for career development in a project-based economy. The research set out to answer the question: what support is available to project staff experience when pursuing a career in project management in Australia in the 21st century? And the sub questions: are there generational differences in career expectations? Are there differences between males and females in the level and type of support received?

2. Background

2.1. *The Australian economy*

Australia is currently a high performing economy but it has not always been so. Beginning life as a British outpost, Australia's predominately rural or outback industries of agriculture and mining developed as the major exports while the manufacturing sector was protected by prohibitive tariff walls encouraging an internal focus for its trade. With the rise of Asian markets and major economic reforms in the 1980s including the floating of the exchange rate and the reduction of tariffs, trade with emerging economies of Asia increased and higher living standards and improved economic growth resulted (Harcourt, 2011). In addition, strong rises in non-rural commodity prices have seen Australia's terms of trade rise by almost 50% since early 2004. The increasing price rises of commodities worldwide have had profound effects on the economy through increased resource movements between sectors and an increase in incomes which boosts demand. This has translated as a geographic movement as mining occurs predominately in the outback areas of less populated States, with those States experiencing higher population growth and lower unemployment than other States (Garton and Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

Aided by earlier economic reforms, growth in Asian markets and advances in communication technologies Australia and its labour market have become less isolated and fared relatively well in difficult economic times. Australia is no longer an outpost and the resource boom has opened up the number of employment opportunities and the type of those opportunities available in the outback, albeit often in fly in, fly out mode (Pini and Mayes, 2013).

2.2. *Australia as a project-based economy*

Changes to the nature of work in Australia have taken place in an economic environment that might be described as project based or project oriented. In a project-based economy much of the activity is carried out in time bounded projects by small temporary organisations (Ekstedt et al., 1999; Pettigrew, 2003; Söderlund, 2012). With economic activity increasingly performed in temporary organisations, projects become the natural way of working, leading to the creation of project-intensive economies (Ekstedt et al., 1999). While the permanent organisations, including large industrial enterprises, small businesses and government authorities retain a strategic and coordinating role as system integrators (Söderlund, 2012) the project based economy, facilitated by technology, enables greater flexibility particularly in terms of resources.

With economic activity increasingly performed in temporary organisations, projects become the natural way of working leading to the creation of project-intensive economies (Ekstedt et al., 1999). In Australia, the concentration of employment within mining for minerals and gas, in the construction and infrastructure and IT industries, combined with the increased use of projects within more traditionally structured organisations and across an increasing range of areas, indicates a project-based

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