



# Project managers and the journey from good to great: The benefits of investment in project management training and education

Jalal Ramazani <sup>\*</sup>, George Jergeas <sup>1</sup>

*Department of Civil Engineering, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada*

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## Abstract

There is a gap between what education providers are offering and what is needed to deal with projects in today's complex work environment. This paper explores how education and training institutions can educate and prepare great project managers for the future by evaluating project management development from the perspective of working project managers. The authors report on a qualitative study of project managers working in the oil and gas sector in Calgary. This paper formulates three main areas which educational institutions should consider in developing and preparing future project managers: 1) developing critical thinking for dealing with complexity, 2) developing softer parameters of managing projects, especially interpersonal skills and leadership as opposed to just technical skills, and 3) preparing project managers to be engaged within the context of real life projects. The authors argue that the education and training systems must do more to prepare project managers on their journey from good to great. © 2014 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Project management education; Project management training and development

## 1. Introduction

Projects play an important role in modern enterprises. In an increasing number of industries, project-based systems are complementing or even replacing traditional functional and divisional structures (Davies et al., 2011). According to the Project Management Institution (PMI, 2013), between 2010 and 2020, 15.7 million new project management roles will be created globally. Along with job growth, there will be a significant increase in the economic footprint of the profession (PMI, 2013). As project management becomes more central in executing projects, effective education and talent management for those in charge of managing projects is vital for organizational competitiveness. This is one of the main reasons that graduates of university project management programs have been in high

demand in all types of industries. At many universities and business schools, project management is an important part of the engineering, MBA and executive education syllabi.

Along with increasing the importance of the projects and project-based organizations, industries are wrestling with significant challenges in managing their projects yet projects continue to fail at an astonishing rate. In many projects, the expected performance of a project management practitioner, group of project managers, or project management office is less than the actual perceived performance (Hammoud, 2008; Jergeas, 2008; Jergeas and Ruwanpura, 2009; Pomfret, 2008; Stanley and Uden, 2013; Tabernik, 2009). For example, according to the Chaos Report of 2009, 68% of all projects end up failing (Johnson, 2009). Researchers believe that to overcome challenges in managing projects, fresh approaches to practitioner development are needed (Atkinson, 2008; Córdoba and Piki, 2012; Egginton, 2012; Reif and Mitri, 2005; Rolstadås et al., 2011; Winter et al., 2006). Teaching and learning project management has become the focus of numerous research proposals, debates and studies. The fact that the current approaches of educating and training project management professionals do not meet the need of modern

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 403 801 1732.

E-mail addresses: [jramazan@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jramazan@ucalgary.ca) (J. Ramazani), [jergeas@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jergeas@ucalgary.ca) (G. Jergeas).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 403 220 8135.

enterprises is now well accepted (Córdoba and Piki, 2012; Ojiako et al., 2011). In this paper, we first briefly comment on project management education and training to provide background context for the paper. Next we look at the experiences of practicing project managers to identify what changes are necessary to further improve the quality of project management education.

### 1.1. Challenges in educating and training project managers

Interest in the education and development of project managers is growing extensively (Egginton, 2012; Rolstadås et al., 2011; Winter et al., 2006). Realizing the need for management development and capability integration in projects, industries have started to invest significantly in the area of project management development (Winter et al., 2006). The expenses devoted to training, certifications and project methodologies are huge; however, the failure rate is still high and the gaps between expected and actual results are still there (Starkweather and Stevenson, 2011). It seems that current education does not adequately prepare managers to deal with the complex realities of the real world (Winter et al., 2006). Thomas and Mengel (2008) argued that current project management education is not suited at all to prepare project managers for managing projects. Crawford (2005) and Starkweather and Stevenson (2011) explained that there is little or no empirical evidences that certified project managers with the popular methods of project education are any more successful than non-certified project managers. Similar ideas are discussed by Seidler-de Alwis and Hartmann (2008); who believe that the traditional approach to educating project managers has relied substantially on throwing a lot of data at the human mind and hoping it will generate the right programs and processed data. Similarly, Papke-Shields et al. (2010) found that project management practices that make a difference may not be the most frequently used. In fact, project management training and education fail in preparing project management students to deal with the increasing complexity that they face in today's working environment and make little use of existing innovative learning environments and techniques (Thomas and Mengel, 2008). Researchers believe that it is time to review our understanding of project management education and reflect upon how we develop project managers to deal with the increasing level of complexity and uncertainty in project environments (Winter et al., 2006).

Clearly, there appears to be a gap between what education providers are offering and what is needed to deal with projects in today's work environment. Accordingly, this research study explores how education and training institutions can prepare project managers for the future by evaluating project management development from the perspective of working project managers. The authors argue that understanding the experience of project managers will enable institutions to address educational factors more effectively in the future. In this research we investigated the role of both academic education for project managers at universities and also corporate training and development for improving the role of practicing project managers. The goal is to identify what changes are necessary to further improve the

quality of project management training and education. Our intention is to contribute both to the debate about the future of project management education for students, and corporate training and developments for working project managers. The authors subsequently discuss practical implications.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Questions

This study aims to answer the following question: How can project management education and training turn technical engineers into great project managers? What more must the education system do to help good project managers evolve to become great?

### 2.2. Respondents

The study targeted project managers and project engineers working in the oil and gas sector in Calgary who were able to discuss their experiences in detail. Participants were selected using a combination of two sampling procedures. The study began with convenience sampling; informants were first contacted by telephone or email, informed of the nature and purpose of the study and invited to participate. Those who indicated interest were asked to arrange a time for an interview, which would last approximately one hour. After data was generated from the first two interviews, the process of additional sampling was guided by the principles of theoretical sampling (Glaser, 2008) to ensure that only those project managers who were active and also had responsibilities in a project environment were included. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants in this study.

### 2.3. Analysis

Applying the grounded theory approach and constant comparison method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the data was collected and analyzed simultaneously. Using the principles of theoretical sampling, it was confirmed that all interviewees had in-depth insight about the project. Analysis of the data started with the first two interviews, aided by standard software for qualitative analysis, namely NVivo. A group of twenty nine project managers were interviewed, composed of 8 females and 21 males. After analyzing data the result was reviewed with a group of project managers using a focus group. In this phase, a small group of participants gathered to discuss the results of the interview analysis under the guidance of a facilitator (researcher) who often played a detached role (Klenke, 2008). Three focus groups were held with thirteen project managers.

### 2.4. Validation

To increase credibility of results, information-rich cases were selected for in-depth study as well as different sites for maximum variability (Giacomini and Cook, 2000; Mays and Pope, 2000; Patton, 2002).

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