

Your partners in project success

CITI Limited

White paper

Project manager profiling:
behavioural competency and
potential (Part 2)



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Page

Contents

Introduction	1
Insights from high performing project managers	1
Using competency models	1
Profiling management styles	3
Assessing potential.....	4
The Floreat approach to assessing potential	4
References	5
Useful sources	5
Further information about the Author	6
Further information about CITI Limited.....	6

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Introduction

In part 1 of these two papers we reviewed approaches to project management profiling and made recommendations on how to get best value from your investment in profiling. Many organisations attempt to link assessment and development into competency models, often generic models that can be applied across the organisation. This paper introduces project management specific competency models as provided by the major Professional bodies and focuses in particular on the assessment of behavioural competences as a way of identifying underlying capability and 'potential'. Behavioural and personal competences are often cited as critical to overall project management performance. They are, however, the most difficult to assess and sometimes the most controversial to act upon.

Insights from high performing project managers

In the early 1990's CITI looked at the characteristics of a group of some 900 project managers, running 1500 projects, of a variety of sizes and levels of complexity. We were particularly interested in identifying 'high performing' project managers to evaluate any 'special' characteristics. What could be learned from those project managers who ran major projects and just kept getting them right?

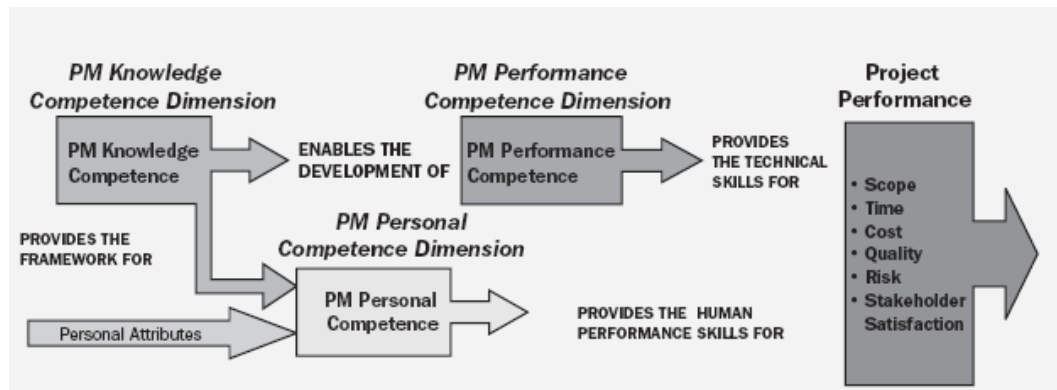
A variety of insights were gained from this work. We found, for example, that experience (in particular the range of experiences) was a far higher correlate with overall performance than knowledge. The average years of experience for the high performing project managers was 15 years with none of the group having less than eight years in a project manager role. It is likely that this not only reflects the gathering of knowledge and skills over time, but also the maturation of managerial and personal competence.

In this research, behavioural characteristics and personality traits were analysed. For example, in the face of extremely challenging environments the high performing project managers exhibited integrity and toughness to see it through even when faced with malign political pressures. The tenacity and courage to stand in the spotlight, alone if necessary, when bombarded by mental, temporal and political pressures was clearly an essential characteristic on the most complex projects and programmes.

Using competency models

The findings from this work are very much in-line with the Project Management Institute's (PMI) Project Manager Competency Development (PMCD) framework published in 2002. PMCD distinguishes six personal competences which include achievement orientation, and cognitive and personal effectiveness – the ability and desire to see things through to a successful completion as defined by the organisation and end client. PMI describe personal competences as fundamental to the development of the performance skills required to manage projects successfully.

Dimensions of competency: PMCD Framework, Project Management Institute, 2002



The PMCD framework provides a breakdown of the ‘competency clusters’, and units of competence and suggests performance measures against each unit. It is designed to be applicable generically to all project managers regardless of the nature, type, size, or complexity of projects in which they are engaged. In total there are some 36 units (19 relating to personal competence) to be measured. This is similar in magnitude to the number of competences assessed by the Association for Project Management Practitioner (APM) qualification. The problem this raises, however, is the sheer time required to effectively assess across the complete competency set. The APM Practitioner qualification focuses on just 23 competence areas, but still takes 2.5 days to complete.

Mini case study: *An insurance organisation wished to implement project management specific development profiling across a large project community. An initial challenge was to identify who the actual project managers were. A resource database existed but the project manager job title was used to refer to anything from 2-person team leaders to project managers of major change initiatives. It was also suspected that some people who were actually running projects did not have the title of project manager. (When CITI analysed recent data on the job titles of 3000 managers who were running projects we found over 400 different job titles). It was therefore decided to offer the profiling to all those who felt they were ‘involved in running projects’.*

To deal with the potentially large numbers involved, a three tier approach was used. A questionnaire focused on recent experiences was used to identify those people who included project management as one of the major roles in their job. These people were then offered a profiling session which focused on knowledge, skills, attitudes and experience. Attendance on a 1 day development centre focusing on behavioural competences was then phased with those project managers already showing sound knowledge and skills attending the earlier sessions. There were concerns that had to be dealt with sensitively throughout the process – “if I don’t get through the first round are you saying I’m not a project manager” and “why isn’t my project manager being prioritised”. Overall, given the demand to put through large numbers within a limited budget the organisation felt that this was an effective and fair approach which yielded results focused on their overall project priorities.

Mini case study: *In another organisation it was felt that it would be inappropriate to implement an assessment centre focused on behavioural competences as this would overlap with the existing leadership programme. Initially an attempt was made to consolidate the output from the leadership programme. This was partially successful. However, not all the project managers were involved in the leadership programme and there were concerns that the leadership behavioural competences were too generic and the output too difficult to apply within the project context. An alternative*

approach was implemented which involved the use of 360 degree questionnaire feedback running alongside project manager profiling focused on knowledge, skills, experience and attitudes. This had the added advantage of ensuring that line managers felt they were actively contributing to the profiling process – their voice was heard.

Profiling management styles

As part of project manager development profiling, CITI uses a diagnostic questionnaire to identify project manager attitudes. Attitudes are indicators of the individual's 'value system' and ultimately affect the behaviours an individual exhibits. Like tools such as Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), an analysis of attitudes gives a view about the style and the behaviour set an individual will tend to adopt.

This project manager diagnostic allows the comparison of attitudes with those found in a known to be high performing group. If the individual differs markedly from this group on any one item then this does not mean they are 'bad' in that area, it simply highlights that this might be an area for considering reflective questions such as – do I attend to this area enough, what styles am I using here and how can I be more effective in this area? If an individual differs markedly from the high performance group across all of the attitude sets then it may be that this person's style is not commensurate with that of a high performing project manager.

The diagnostic tool uses four survey areas. In a recent analysis to be presented at the APM Conference, 19th-20th October 2007, it was found that managers' perceptions of where they spent their time provided particularly interesting results, with the higher capability project managers showing a distinctly different profile of 'perceived time spent on what' from their more junior colleagues. This work is to be followed up by Middlesex University, National Centre for Project Management. Should it prove significant then it would suggest that assessment techniques such as those used for recruitment would benefit from a structured approach to the analysis of what the candidate feels they do in their current role.

A number of management style questionnaires exist in the open market-place, but few of these have been mapped specifically against the role of project manager. Whether this matters or not will depend upon your views as to whether general manager and project manager competences are one and the same. Our experience is that, while they clearly overlap, the emphasis and therefore the style and approach are different. I think most of us would agree that you can get very good general or functional managers who make very poor project managers and vice versa. There is still, however, a tendency in some organisations to appoint senior general managers to project manage the most business critical projects. This is based upon the often misguided perception that the only way to run a complex project is to appoint somebody with seniority and political clout, regardless of concerns about project management aptitude.

One of the most commonly used personality questionnaires is the MBTI. Attempts have been made to map the output of this into the career of the project manager but with 5 of the 16 characteristic types pointing towards the project management career, it is a first-pass predictive tool at most. In work reported by Max Wideman et al (1994) the output of MBTI is mapped against four project leader types: the explorer, the coordinator, the driver and the administrators. Each leadership style can be mapped to different types of projects and project environments. BAE Systems have suggested a similar approach when looking specifically at the skills and competences found in photogrammatic project managers (BAE Systems 2001).

In theory, the output from tools such as MBTI could thus be used to support the matching of project managers against specific projects. Practical application of this approach still remains rare - possibly because relatively few organisations are actively using project manager to project matching processes, when availability often is the predominant selection factor.

Assessing potential

Assessment of behaviours and management styles is particularly interesting in that it may provide a route to identifying the potential capability of a prospective project manager. With so many projects and so few project managers, organisations are looking for mechanisms to identify their 'rising stars' as early as possible and identify where career changes may be appropriate. Floreat Consulting have developed an approach to testing general management potential. CITI and Floreat now plan to look at how this might be applied specifically in project management - this will be reported on further in 2008. We asked Richard Scriven (MD Floreat Consulting) to provide a commentary on their approach.

The Floreat approach to assessing potential

The preceding sections highlight the important difference between competence and potential. In most people's understanding, 'competence' is the ability to exercise a skill or perform a specific task. It is something we learnt yesterday and can do today. 'Potential' on the other hand, is the capacity to learn how to perform more complex tasks in the future. Most of the time employers are interested in both: they need people who can earn their keep immediately, but who can also grow and add value to the business longer term.

All competence is learned, but logically, you cannot learn more from a given piece of experience than your ability to understand the experience allows. That is, your learning capacity, or potential. Logically again, the more relevant knowledge you can assimilate, the further you can progress in a large organisation. This is not quite as simple as it sounds: how to succeed as CEO of a major company is not conveniently written in a handbook. It is tacit knowledge – found in the visions, experiences, intuitions and ideas of people, and in forging novel connections and possibilities between apparently unrelated items. People with high potential have a knack of doing this, spotting quickly what is relevant and fruitful in the world around them.

Floreat Consulting's research concentrated on understanding the roots of learning capacity. We interviewed several hundred successful managers in one of the world's largest companies, identifying the factors that distinguished this group from less successful colleagues. We found six fundamental qualities that fully defined the difference – three qualities of intellect, and three of temperament.

Intellect	Temperament
Problem Analysis	Drive
Creative Thinking	Resilience
Judgement	Empathy

If potential is indeed learning capacity, it must have a limit somewhere: potential is not infinite. Indeed, Potential has both a 'size' – the 'amount' of these qualities that we have – and a 'shape' - described by the relative sizes of the qualities. People will often be stronger on some qualities than on others – better, for example, at thinking out complex plans than in putting those plans into practical action. Different roles require different balances of the qualities. Someone with all the qualities at the same level would be a typical complex-project manager, whereas a person with particular strengths on the 'temperament' side may have a natural aptitude for managing projects employing diverse or difficult groups of people.

The qualities are processes, not content: about how we think and act, not the detail of what we think and do. They are stable: they change little once we reach adulthood and they are independent of variables such as gender, ethnicity, social or educational background.

Having determined the qualities defining potential, we developed a scale to show how much of each quality is needed to become competent at benchmark levels of work in a business. This was achieved using critical incident interviewing to specify very precisely how the qualities were used by people who were thoroughly competent in roles at different levels. Doing this enabled us to compare directly the learning capacity of a person with the learning demands of any role.

Following this, a structured interviewing process was developed to measure these qualities with precision and accuracy.

This ability to predict a person's performance in the future is, without doubt, a very useful tool. It can help to make choices between candidates at interview, or to decide which of a group of managers would be best-suited to a specific role. One of its particular strengths is that, in selecting people on their future abilities, rather than on their past performance, no bias is given in circumstances where when the past has not offered an equal opportunity for development. In South Africa, for example, we undertook a major independent study which uncovered huge potential in a population with limited access to education and work experience. Furthermore, the process could also be used to determine which people were most likely to represent a return on investment in training, for example, or whether or not a management team could grow a business successfully in the long term.

References

Budhram, SC. & Kunz, JE, Decision making and the Photogrammatic Project Manager, 2001, www.eomonline.com/Common/currentissues/Sept01/Stanley.htm

Wideman (2002) Project teamwork personality profiles and the population at large: www.maxwideman.com/papers/profiles/profiles.pdf

Useful sources

Project management competency models have been developed by most of the professional bodies as well as Government bodies such as the Office of Government and Commerce.

The following competency models have all been either developed or reviewed substantially over the last five years. All include comprehensive mapping of skills and behavioural competences.

PMCD Framework, Project Management Institute, 2002 – A comprehensive analysis of units of competence with performance measures clearly defined. Similar in structure and style to UK NVQs. These can be purchased via the PMI website: www.pmi.org

GAPP standards – GAPPS is an independent competency standard (not aligned with any specific Body of Knowledge or Methodology). It is based upon an analysis performed in Australia, Europe and Africa – these standards have been adopted in Australia and South Africa. Middlesex University, National Centre for Project Management was a founding member of this group. For further information: www.globalpmstandards.org/ and www.pmforum.org/library/reports

IPMA competence baseline - International Project Management Association's competence baseline. This is a global standard, focused on skills assessment, which is designed to be customisable by the national certification associations. It has 4 levels, from certified Project Manager Associate to Certified Programme Director. Version 3 of the standard can be downloaded: www.ipma.ch/certification/standards

Further information about the Author

Louise Worsley, Design Authority, CITI

Louise is responsible for ensuring that every CITI product reflects best-practices in industry and academia. She has a particular interest in the profiling of project managers – having been involved with this since joining CITI in 1994. She has profiled, job-shadowed and coached more than 500 project managers and gained real insights into what makes good project managers great.

Louise is a visiting lecturer at Reading and Middlesex University in the UK and at the University of Cape Town. She is the CITI sponsor for the Middlesex University research project on project manager capability, and is currently working in South Africa, looking at how the identification of potential can be used to support the development of future generations of project managers.

Richard Scriven, Managing Director, Floreat Consulting

Richard Scriven specialises in understanding and developing the potential of individuals, teams and organisations. While working for Shell International he developed the 'Potentia' methodology for measuring long-term potential and founded Potentia International. Later, he started Floreat Consulting to create further practical tools for developing and measuring potential, particularly in multi-cultural settings.

Richard's current interests are in providing techniques to predict the demand and supply of talent for future business success, and in creating efficient processes to match supply and demand at individual and organisational levels. He is also developing simulations of very large projects, using an understanding of the nature of thinking, to enable teams to consider the full long-term complexities of the project and its context - and to predict the future impact of competing pressures over the life of the project.

Further information about CITI Limited

CITI focuses on the application of 'best practice' project and programme management tools and techniques. For nearly 20 years we have researched, practised and taught project and programme management to many of the leading organisations in the UK.

Based in Newport Pagnell - Buckinghamshire, our project and programme consultants are dedicated and passionate about developing project and programme management excellence.

In addition to our permanent consultants has a large pool of associates who are profiled, developed and accredited to the exacting standards of CITI professional project managers. These individuals manage complex projects and programmes for organisations that seek a level of professionalism and predictability that comes with professionally trained project managers. Acting as role models, they lead by example, showing how the professional project manager behaves and leaves a lasting legacy in terms of attitude and outcome.

Further information about Floreat Consulting

Floreat Consulting helps its clients to identify, develop and realise the talent needed to improve and sustain performance.

Our core activities are: measuring the talent needed to deliver future strategy; identifying the latent talent available within individuals and teams to meet these needs; and enabling individuals, teams and organisations to develop to their full capacity.

We provide advice and systems to help managers to understand and develop the talent inherent in their organisations. These range from brief surveying techniques to identify broadly the raw talent available for development, right through to the detailed matching of talented people to key roles within large organisations. In addition, we can measure the talent available within a project team and assess its ability to perform a given project well; or appraise the capabilities of a management team to deliver added value in MBO's or mergers.