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Diverse talent: Enhancing gender participation in project management

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Abstract

This paper argues that a strategic response prioritising diverse talent as a key resource for delivering projects and programmes will not only enhance project success by increasing skilled project personnel but also ultimately increase women's participation at all levels of project, programme and portfolio management.

The limited number of women in project management has been extensively highlighted - many are disadvantaged and a pay gap exists. Growth in numbers is still painfully slow. Recognising issues has not resulted in wide ranging reviews or a strategic approach to resolve. A collaborative strategy framework to achieve sustained change is proposed.

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1. Introduction

The paper sets out to highlight the challenging context of project management currently and in the foreseeable decade, as the global demand for talented project managers has never been greater and is set to rise. But alongside this forecast growth in the project management profession an existing skills gap (Sheehan and Jones, 2015) is

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already evident. The impact of this ongoing skills gap on the delivery of large complex projects also has an international dimension and global impact.

Parallel with this high demand, is low representation of certain groups amongst project managers. This is marked for one group – women, who still account for at most a third of the profession (PMI, 2013) but in most instances as in the UK (Arras, 2014) only about a quarter of the profession or less. The slow increase in their numbers is frequently highlighted, alongside their limited progression through to senior management (Henderson, Stackman and Koh, 2010).

Bridging this growing skills gap this paper argues is unlikely to be achieved with the ongoing piecemeal response. A strategic approach needs to be adopted to achieve the required growth in numbers and ensure that talented individuals are attracted to the profession and more importantly retained. Fishing in the same pool that has limited representation of certain groups in the past cannot be the only option. Embracing a diverse range of talent will contribute to addressing the huge rise in numbers of project managers required. It will also attract female talent and invariable start to make a difference in female underrepresentation within the profession including at leadership level.

2. The Current Context

2.1 Skills gap

The projected skills deficit in project management and project delivery and its anticipated implication for future infrastructure projects is now regularly highlighted. In its global review and report on the talent gap (PMI, 2013) notes that the demand for project managers and the gap will rise in Europe, India and China. Similarly the PWC (2014) report on construction and infrastructure projects in Sub Saharan Africa notes the anticipated huge increase in infrastructure projects and highlights skills shortage as a key risk in its delivery. The skills gap was also a topical issue at the recent Africa Conference held in Oxford in May 2015. In the UK, (Atkins, 2015) reports that the shortfall in skills will adversely impact product delivery generally as well as the quality of the product, and more specifically add to overall costs and necessitate the need for skills from overseas. But as the skills deficit is already indicated to be a global issue to be addressed in all regions, resolving it requires a sustainable approach.

This cacophony of voices on the skills deficit also highlights the ageing employee base and the need to attract youth. Increasing the numbers of women is also often muted. If these suggested solutions could be easily achieved, the current concern would not exist. Analysing the problem is often more straightforward than implementing a solution.

2.2 Project success

In its recent report on the conditions for project success (APM, 2015) highlights 12 criteria, more than half of them - such as effective governance, goals and objectives recognised by all stakeholders and not being in conflict with secondary objectives, capable sponsors and supportive organisations - are related to people and their behaviours. The report notes that ‘while the key to success is known ... practice is not applied’ (APM, 2015a p.3) resulting in 80% of projects not wholly meeting their objectives. Could this impinge on the project to address the skills gap?

Henderson et al (2010) and others reviewing project failures, have attributed flawed decision making such as poor judgement or assessment of risk as contributing to project failure. Phillips, Liljenquist & Neal (2010) note that diversity improves group decision making. This is an area where diverse teams could contribute to project success.

2.3 Women in project management

In the UK, women in project management account for only about a quarter of the profession (Arras, 2015). Within the Association for Project Management this figure drops to less than 20%. These percentages conceal variances, with lower levels involved in construction and infrastructure projects and increased levels in other

sectors. Traditionally project managers in construction have come from technical backgrounds as engineering, where women are underrepresented (less than 10%).

One group that stands out above others are the project managers within the airline more specifically British Airways where nearly two thirds are women. This indicates cultural influences at play in different industries. Creating change and increasing the numbers of female project managers, requires an understanding of the nuances which cause such variation, as well as changing behaviours and perceptions (Okoro, 2015) to attract talent. How can the success of certain sectors be replicated in others. Is it the way in which they recruit the recruit, the culture of the organisation, a combination of factors?

Women project managers often earn less than their male counterparts (APM, 2015b, Arras, 2014). Issues highlighted by project managers as challenges in research as (Henderson, Stackman & Koh, 2010) include low value project, remote and geographically dispersed projects, career progression, work life balance, lack of respect. Are any of these more endemic in certain industries than in others?

With this host of challenges, attracting and retaining female talent to address the skills deficit will require a multifaceted and culturally sensitive approach.

3 A New Strategy

The key to increasing inclusion and enhancing diverse talent within project management requires acknowledgement of the skills shortage which will escalate without targeted action and the need for all, particularly leadership to reflect on their capabilities and how these can be channeled to effect change and an agreed vision. Technical processes alone do not deliver project. People with the intellect they bring, along with their myriad of soft skills, diverse experiences and behaviours contribute to overcoming challenges and achieving project success. Based on review of literature on inclusion and talent management as well as diversity, supplemented with my experience over the years, a strategy is proposed with five key elements leadership, inclusive processes, cultural awareness, innovation and nurturing.

This paper argues that a strategic response prioritising diverse talent as a key resource for delivering projects and programmes will not only enhance project success by increasing skilled project personnel but also ultimately increase women's participation at all levels of project, programme and portfolio management.

The limited number of women in project management has been extensively highlighted - many are disadvantaged and a pay gap exists. Growth in numbers is still painfully slow. Recognising issues has not resulted in wide ranging reviews or a strategic approach to resolve. A collaborative strategy framework to achieve sustained change is proposed.



Fig. 1. Strategy

LEADERSHIP

- Vision
- Communication
- Embedding change

PROCESSES

- inclusive
- not stifling
- Flexible
- Resolve bottlenecks

CULTURE

- Culturally intelligent
- Emotionally intelligent
- 'investors'

INNOVATION

- Multiple entry routes incl. career changers
- Spot and encourage
- Welcome & reward
- Innovation

Opportunity to thrive

NUTURING

- explicit and fair progression routes
- challenging opportunities
- developing talent

3.1 Leadership

Leadership is key as it drives the vision. Leadership prioritises strategic links both top down and bottom up to address this challenge, and maintains channels for two way dialogue - feedback and reporting back. Leadership ensures ultimately that change is embedded.

3.2 Processes

How inclusive are your processes? Do they stifle and disengage talent? Are they flexible enough to suit a diverse range of talented individuals? Assume bottlenecks exist at all stages except otherwise proven. Room for improvement always exist, ultimately however processes emanate from culture.

3.3 Culture

How inclusive is your culture? Is your organisation culturally intelligent (Middleton, 2014), as well as emotionally intelligent. Who is visible within your organisation or team and why? Are your people 'investors' (Sparrow, 2013) who are fully engaged, fired up, ready and able to give their best regardless of their individual strengths of styles? Are they able to operate across internal and external stakeholder cultures?

3.4 Innovation

How innovative is your organisation? How easily do you spot talent or enable talent to emerge? Are you prioritising traditional entry routes or exploring innovative ones. Are you missing out on talented apprentices and career changers? Is innovation welcomed and acknowledged or rewarded in the organisations and its team?

3.5 Opportunity to thrive - nurturing

Nurturing and developing is a pre-requisite to retain talent. Career progression was the key job challenge highlight by 60% of respondents (WIPM 2012, WIPM, 2014). Attracting the talented staff is just the start. Are they challenged? Sheehan and Jones (2015) note variety of work and matching skills to projects are important. Constraining talent can contribute to their exit. (Heath and Pem, 2013)

In adopting these proposed elements within a new strategy, organisations have to be courageous; as for most it is a systemic culture shift and different way of operating. They don't however need to originate totally new procedures, as good practice already exists and can be adapted or emulated.

4 Good Practice

Identifying and sharing good practice is paramount, as often the shortcomings of the status quo are taken for granted as the norm. The examples below indicate that good practice can range from isolated acts to holistic action which join the dots, as well as accelerate and embed change.

4.1 Increasing visibility

The APM Women in Project Management (WIPM) SIG celebrated its 21st Anniversary in 2014. Its significance was marked with a National Conference and evening of celebration, enhancing their visibility within the profession through press coverage and contributed to re-energising the group. There was however recognition that WIPM events and publications were aimed at the profession and probably accessed by a small proportion only. There was a danger that we had been speaking to ourselves all these years. Participation levels of women in the profession are only altering slowly - still at a level of only about a quarter nationally, and less still within the Association.

In 2015, the group produced its first video (Wipm, 2015) aimed at the 13 – 21 age range featuring project managers from diverse industries as airlines, logistics, space industry and construction. This external facing

initiative was accompanied by a fact sheet on the profession and entry routes as well as biographies of the featured project managers. Aimed at girls and young women as well as their influencers - peer groups, parents and career advisers; it is an easily accessed resource. It can be viewed directly or used by project managers and others to raise visibility and awareness of the profession in order to attract diverse talent. Producing and disseminating the video, demonstrates that an alternative vision and strategy can contribute to altered behaviours and choices.

Project, the official of the APM was recently revamped from a monthly to a quarterly publication with a new editor. A key aim was to achieve more depth and less frequency. However, it also now includes a more diverse range of project managers as contributors as well as more engaging articles. Invariably it has also provided greater visibility for women in project management.

Increased visibility of women project managers at all levels of their careers as well as their professional achievements creates positive role models.

4.2 Interactive experience

The STEMNET Ambassadors programme in the UK, enables employees and others who sign up to participate in projects at school inspire young people to study the subjects that matter for their future career, show them how these subjects are used in their future careers and oversee as well as judge projects utilising these relevant subjects. It touches several thousand youths annually and is supported by the APM.

One employer BAE who encourages their young employees to participate in the programme, have reported high score feedback - 94% for enjoyment of the day and 91% of the girls participating altered their view and consequently considered engineering as an exciting career (BAE, 2015).

An initiative by an academic (Reeson, 2015) is again targeted at children but with a more specific project management focus. Based on the fundamentals of project management and broken into modules, it is delivered by teachers and was first trialled with school children in Africa to great success. It is to be launched in the UK as Get SMART with hopes to roll it out globally. This programme makes the children more rounded individuals, provides success in the work place but ultimately contribute to making them informed stakeholders on future projects whether in the delivery or end-user role.

4.3 Creating the right context for diverse talent to thrive

Atkins, an international project management firm with a large presence in the UK is ranked the third best Employer for Women in the UK (The Times, 2015). It actively encourages and supports female staff at all levels. Atkins recognises the challenge of attracting women into engineering - a traditionally male dominated sector and have devised a holistic programme to succeed. The strategy promotes fairness, development and work life balance.

This occurs in multiple ways, through Atkins setting up a women's professional network, a women's leadership council and a women's development programme. For women returning to work after a career break, they have recently piloted a returner's course.

Their female staff have equal opportunity to work on projects abroad, in addition to range of working options that include job share, working a shorter week, flexitime or working from home. These working options are available to all other staff.

Likewise BAE Systems another company with a large cohort of project managers and ranked fourth in The Times top 50 Employers of Women have a five strand vision on diversity and inclusion that attracts, supports and retains its employees. It is their ninth year in The Times Top 50 list.

Since 2010, BAE has monitored and measured its progress in diversity and inclusion using the five level matrix which at level 1 is basic compliance with legislation and at level 5 is behavioural and cultural change with diversity and inclusion fully integrated in business as usual. They have formed partnerships with like-minded organisations working to promote diversity globally. One of their project managers who joined the company through their apprenticeship programme is featured on the WIPM (2015) video.

These organisations recognise that their more inclusive culture will assist in meeting the challenges of a skills gap as well as attract talent from a wider pool to their organisations ultimately enhancing and innovation and the

resultant performance. Encouraging more firms to act like them in other to address the skills deficit and diverse talent gap requires a joined up and coordinated strategy.

5 Limitations and Conclusion

This paper is a limited review of secondary data. It focuses on diverse talent and gender in the delivery aspects of project management within the European context. It does not explore or discuss the gender issues in scoping and planning projects or in communicating with stakeholders and end users. It acknowledges that gender and diversity inclusion can change the culture and practices of organisations, but it does not specifically review how greater diversity among project managers impacts on decision making and performance in projects. All these exclusions are areas that require further investigation to acquire a deeper understanding. Indicators associated with the good practice initiatives will be however tracked and reported on in the future.

The initial consideration of the context lead to a five element approach being advocated, which if adopted strategically could impact on attracting and retaining diverse talent. The good practice shared includes limited and more comprehensive initiatives by groups, educators and employers/employees who together can change behaviours and culture. The challenge is for leadership with influence in professional institutions, organisations or groups to formulate strategy and well as prioritise and champion considered initiatives to address the looming skills gaps which are creative and simultaneously stereotype busting, culturally aware and sustainable.

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