

## The accidental professional

BY UNSIGNED

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### Support group seeks to emphasize the "pro" in project management

Sixty to eighty percent of all business-related projects fail. This is due in part to the project manager – a strange animal in the commerce world; one that must be part quarterback, part diplomat and part mental acrobat.

"People get dumped into the position," said Todd Williams, head of the Vancouver-based high risk project recovery consulting firm eCameron.

"This is one of the more subtle reasons why projects tend to fail. If a person is good at leading a team and knowledgeable about a product, a lot of times their company will just put them in charge of a major project, regardless of their past experience."

Williams said if the wrong PM was picked, the project, whether it's creation of a new computer network, development of a new product or a construction project, could spiral wildly out of control, and cost a company millions. That's why more businesses generally look for "certified" project managers when recruiting for the key position. And that's why the Project Management Institute exists.

### Back to school

The nonprofit organization, founded in the mid-1980s, provides training for project managers, and administers certification exams, giving those who work in the profession the credentials required to be marketable. A project manager can be certified as a Certified Associate Project Manager or a Project Management Professional. To become a CAPM, a candidate needs 1,500 hours of experience on a project team, or 23 hours of formal education specific to project management. A PMP needs 7,500 hours in a project leadership role and 60 months of project management experience.

There are close to 1,100 members in the Portland-area PMI chapter. Members pay \$20 in annual dues, and \$119 nationally. PMI certifies more than 300 project managers each year.

PMI Vice President of Operations Jeff Turner said his goal is to show the value of project management to businesses.

"It has not always been recognized as having value," Turner said. "There are a whole host of skills involved with organizing a project. There's a different way of thinking about a project versus an ongoing operation."

Along with being a certification provider, Williams said PMI plays the role of support group for people in the profession. The Institute holds round-table discussions on the fourth Friday of each month where managers can seek advice, share stories and find solutions to the day-to-day problems associated with the profession. The meetings are held at the Clark Public Facilities building in Vancouver. Additionally, meetings are held weekly in Portland.

"It's kind of like the Alcoholics Anonymous for project managers," Williams said of the Institute. "You sit around the table, you've got this little name badge on and you say 'Hi, my name is Todd, I'm a project manager, and I have a problem....'"

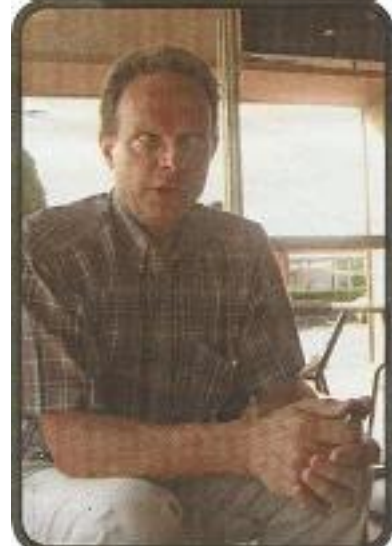
Project management is different from regular management in that a PM is constantly dealing with new teams and working from a specific start to a specific end.

It is offered as a sub-curriculum at schools such as Clark College, but generally focuses on the broader umbrella of management. Williams said this creates a lack of preparedness among management when it comes to highly specific details.

"They find they need more education in the field, so they go to PMI," he said. Williams added that a large amount of people are going back to school to learn more about project management.

### No bombshells

Some pitfalls that could lead to the high project failure rate include what is known in the profession as "scope creep."



Scope creep is what happens when things get added to or changed on the project. The result is a project that grows to proportions beyond the novice project manager's control.

"With IT, you as a client may say 'I don't like that button there, let's move it over there,'" Williams explained. "And you think it's relatively simple to just move the button, when it actually takes hundreds of hours extra. A project manager may not realize the work that's involved in doing that, and could say 'oh, yeah, I'll give that to you for free.' He just blew hundreds of hours' worth of time. If the project manager doesn't pay attention to these details, the project will go over budget."

Williams said a good project manager is prepared for such surprises. He does not seem easily surprised, himself. His firm specializes in recovering projects that are teetering precariously on the edge, what he calls "red projects." This, he said, sometimes requires the removal of some team members.

"I've come in as a hatchet man three times," he said. "To run a project well, you have to be able to identify the problem areas. Sometimes that means getting rid of people."

### **Danger zone**

To be sure, project management requires the ability to be flexible and to adapt to complicated scenarios. One of Williams' more frustrating project recoveries involved three countries, some M-16 rifles and a shooting. He was in Israel in 2000, working with an IT firm from Toronto as they were dealing with a company out of Rochester, N.Y. The Israelis were involved in a confrontation with Palestinian militants and a friend of Williams was shot and killed and made international news at the time.

"This was a project in a war zone," he said. "I stared down M-16s on that project."

In contrast, Williams said, just days before that experience, he was in Asia, dealing with the super-polite business culture there.

"I went from being very cordial and finding ways to say no without saying no, to the "in your face," table pounding style of the Middle East in a war zone," he said.

To hear that story, one might think dealing with multiple companies in Clark County would be a walk in park. Not so, said Williams.

"It's equally as frustrating," he said.

In fact, Williams said cultural differences between businesses can be even more dramatic here than in other countries, M-16s or not.



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