

ACTIONABLE WHITE PAPER

PROJECT MANAGEMENT



Project Managers, High-impact, Low-impact, and 20 Questions

Global CIO at a large international Financial Services company said:
"thought provoking...easy read...worth the time."

High-impact Project Manager said:
"This is a fantastic article. I am going to include a link to it in my LinkedIn profile!"



To our knowledge, this is the first paper to look inside the nature of a Project Manager. The paper's first half discusses low and high functioning PMs, who they are and what you can expect from them. The paper's second half provides you with 20 questions to determine if a high functioning PM is needed on a project.

Synopsis



Sleepless Nights

IT managers say it's what keeps them up at night: thinking about the high stakes riding on every project manager. PMs directly affect IT's credibility, competence and reputation. Everything PMs do reflects on the IT organization, its management, and ultimately determines the skepticism or confidence of the user community.

When you mix such high stakes together with the alarming rate of project failures (estimated at 40 – 50 % at some companies*), and stir in the risks found in technologies and business change, it is evident that specifying the right type of PM requires much more thought and better candidates than run of the mill, off the shelf PM resources.

Low-impact PMs & Project Failure Rates - Studies draw a direct link between the high rate of project failures and the competence of those sitting in the PM role today. Analysis shows that a majority of today's PMs have skills and backgrounds that are far too light for the big jobs and challenges they must face. Their deficits lead inevitably to low levels of impact on their projects, a factor that directly feeds into project failure rates. These PMs are seen as "Low-impact PMs" (a future Blog will look into the vendor world to explain the root cause of why there are so many Low-impact PMs candidates for hire).

Analysis also shows that these Low-impact PMs are actually functioning more like administrators. Their To-Do list looks impressive and impactful, but the majority of their actual time is spent arranging meetings, taking minutes, publishing dashboards, etc. Their tendency is to observe from afar rather than be a catalyst to action, helping others to fix and solve.

In essence, these Low-impact PMs are involved in the project, but they are not committed to the project. Their profile is the complete opposite of a "High-impact Project Manager" (HIPM).

What High-impact PMs Look Like - First and foremost, HIPMs are people of action, they exhibit many traits of a classic Driver. They know only one mode: dive into the project up to their chins. They eat, sleep and wake up thinking about the project, their minds are working nonstop, thinking about deliverables, potential problems, and ideas of actions they can do right now to keep the project on track. They obsess on the project because that is who they are. HIPMs believe that success hinges on complete mastery of the devil in the details; for them, there is no other way than to go deep and deeper until the roadblock problem is solved. Although they are people of action, an HIPM always understands and observes the boundary between facilitating and decision making. This is a person who takes problems off the table, does not ignore, bury, or add to them. They instinctively know when and how to attack problems. An essential quality they have is the ability to confront problems with confidence and tact.

In the soft skills area, HIPMs are innately good at reading situations, people and culture. They are adept at handling a broad range of personalities, even under stressful circumstances. HIPMs have the inner poise that breathes stability and cooperation into a project team and confidence among users and stakeholders. They are adept at managing expectations, they are keenly aware of its importance. They possess the seasoned judgment that is required to assess and address risk, interpersonal issues and problems. HIPMs are methodical and accurate when judging people: their strengths, needs, and weaknesses. These qualities, plus strong communication skills, enable an HIPM to work effectively Up, Down and Across the organization.



In the hard skills area, HIPMs are individuals that are experience-hardened, they've truly been there, done that. They've worked in a broad range of projects, including the rescue of Failing/Failed projects. Their work history includes long assignments in CIO and VP level positions, application development, business analysis, user services & liaison, and planning. As a result of their work history, they have a full understanding of the need and techniques of risk management, transparency, compliance and governance.

HIPMs have used all of the major methodologies (Agile, Waterfall, DevOps, etc.) and tool sets. They are zealous in their commitment to their methods and methodologies. HIPMs are comfortable getting into the technical nitty gritty in almost any area, they are primed and ready to do that when project problems are present. They view it as an opportunity to exhibit commitment and leadership.

The Tipping Points: 20 Questions for Deciding on Whether a Project Calls for a HIPM – Are HIPMs required on all projects?

Absolutely not! There are many projects where Low-impact PMs are quite suitable. Examples are: low risk projects; sub-projects within a larger effort; small projects which have little or no dependency on other systems or users; purely internal within IT projects, such as infrastructure efforts; projects which are repetitive, such as annual efforts, where there are best practices and lessons learned already documented and available for reference. Assigned such projects, Low-impact PMs gain the experience, seasoning, and skills to become future HIPMs (using this model, you are building a pipeline of custom made PMs, fully attuned to your environment, tested and proven). A word of caution: As a global CIO pointed out, these innocent looking internal projects might be fraught with politics, or be large and complex, or be implementing of new process improvements. So, tread carefully before simply assigning a project because it is considered "internal".

While every project situation is unique, the following 20 questions should help clarify whether you need a HIPM on a project or not. Consider this, if you answer "Yes" to a few of these questions, you should seriously consider assigning a HIPM to a project.

1. Technology: Does this project involve leading edge or emerging technologies?

2. Complexity: Is this a large, multi-team, multi-location, project?

3. Politics & Hidden Agendas – The ecosystem of every company is subtle, unique and complex. Consequently, serious effort and consideration must be given to identifying all political and agenda factors; keep in mind that they might be quite hidden. As long as people are part of projects, these factors must be given their due.

4. Vendor - Does a vendor play a significant role in executing the project?

- Is this a new vendor to the company?
- Are there any questions /concerns about the vendor's abilities?
- Does the vendor's project management methodology map to your company?



5. Executive Visibility - Board / Executive Management visibility and oversight

6. Recoup Credibility - Is this project a “do-over” of a previously Failed project?
Are we trying to regain credibility and a positive working relationship with the user?

7. First Time Working Together - Is this your “maiden voyage” project with a new user? Do you hope to make a strong first impression?

8. Relationship Management – Are there adversarial/tense relations with internal and/or external users?

9. External Visibility - Will this project be monitored by external agencies, such as regulators, state and federal government entities?

10. Adverse Publicity - If the project does not go well, is there a potential of adverse public publicity (this can include press, investors, trade, community, employees and prospective employees, etc.)

11. Statement of New Management – Is this the first new project initiated under new leadership in the IT organization.

12. Track Record – Does the IT organization have an established satisfactory track record of project management or will this project serve to start that record?

13. Flux Environment – Is the business in a state of flux? Will the project be buffeted by changes in deliverables, budget, sponsorship, charter, priorities, etc.

14. IT Organization Readiness – Is the IT organization stable?

- Is IT Leadership at all levels proven and committed to the project's goals?

15. Self Image & Momentum – Is the project seen as a test case of the organization's Project Management competence? A signal to executives and business leaders that the organization is fully able to carry out its tasks and overcome challenges.

- Is the organization aiming to “hit one out of the park” in order to convince others of its Project Management professionalism?

- Is the organization trying to build a momentum of project management successes? (that would contribute to an image within IT and inside the company of dependability and mastery)

16. Resource Availability – too many part time / shared resources

17. Known Unknowns – Are there many known unknowns to begin with?

18. Sponsorship – Does the project have strong sponsorship?

- A high level of involvement?

- A high level of visibility within the company?

- Positional strength, decision making power, commitment, visible executive support, and permanence in its role?

19. Risk Management Skills – Does the IT organization have core competency in risk management?

20. Methodology – Is the organization thoroughly familiar with a new methodology paradigm (e.g. Agile project in a traditionally Waterfall shop)



Project Goals

- Unrealistic or overly ambitious going in.
- Not enough budget
- Organization doesn't have teams and/or skills to accomplish
- Uncertain or dubious of the legitimate business value of the project

STP's PM Center of Excellence

STP has developed a PM Center of Excellence in collaboration with clients and High Performance PMs. The company believes that this base of expertise is unique and cannot easily be replicated without years of study, commitment and investment. The company knows what a HIPM looks like, what motivates them, why they think and act as they do, and what they eat for breakfast. We know how to work with each client to define the exact HIPM that the project calls for.

Note: As important as the question "Should you have a HIPM assigned to a project?" is, there are other equally important questions: Who makes that decision; How is the decision made, is it part of a process; and When in the project life cycle is that decision made (a future Blog will look into these questions).



Contact us at management@summittechpartners.com to discuss which of our services, such as the “Project Managers Alignment & Proficiency Review”, fits your situation.



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