

Skills and competences international project managers need in order to be successful in a virtual work environment

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Abstract: *Bibliographic research has revealed that, in order to increase performance and the involvement of virtual team members, and in order for international projects to be successfully completed, project managers must possess or acquire specific skills and competences, with a view to being able to adjust to the new work environment. Consequently, they should know how to build a team in the virtual work environment, understand how it functions, how to communicate effectively selecting and using the most appropriate virtual instruments the – support for collaborative processes- , etc. The paper reaches its objectives, by presenting the main challenges that international project managers encounter and by proposing a model of the international project manager’s profile.*

Key-words: *international project management, virtual project team, leadership, competences.*

1. Introduction

“International projects and teams working in a virtual environment represent a reality in recent years and a growing phenomenon, but there still exists a deficit in terms of research in this area” (Dumitraşcu, Iulia, Dumitraşcu, D., D., 2015). Standard project management and international project management share common processes, but this does not mean that “a project manager with only internal or national experience can’t lead an international project” (Grisham T. W., 2011). Marando Anne (2012) stated that “many project managers are not able to successfully lead projects, due to a deficit in terms of management skills”.

At the same time, it is important that international project managers understand that “a team in the virtual work environment represents a team which is doing the majority of its activities, remotely, through technology, as opposed to carrying out the tasks in the face-to-face present context” (Brewer, Pam, Estes 2015.) and that “these teams share a common scope, objectives, work or products”

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(Lee, R., Margaret, 2014), in order to establish and identify the skills that they must possess and/or acquire to effectively manage such a team.

In the first part of the paper, in order to reflect the importance of establishing the specific skills and competences that any manager need to conduct international projects in the virtual environment, we identified the challenges they face in the new environment, and, following this, we presented these skills based on the challenges identified.

2. International project managers challenges

It is obvious that the development of international projects provide some compelling benefits, which accompany the achievement of their goals and objectives. “Through project management companies attain to transfer technologies worldwide and to successfully integrate them into the products, services and organizational processes. International project management provides a solid foundation to create products and services that do not yet exist, but which are necessary to remain competitive in the global market” (Cleland, I., D., Gareis, R., 2006).

However, statistics show that 70% of projects undertaken fail, without achieving their time, budget and performance objectives. (PMI - Project Management Institute, 2013). This is a challenge for project managers. The standard, traditional project management seems to be outdated, insufficient, the rigid structures and methods used are no longer able to comprise the complexity of current projects. Shenhar and Dvir (2007) stated that “the common issue of these failures was that both executives and project teams have not been able to determine, in advance, the degree of uncertainty and complexity, or they did not know how to communicate these new dimensions, to each other, failing to adapt management style to this situation”. Potential problems can take many forms, from various technical specifications in certain parts of the world, quality standards, measurement units, etc., which can lead to delays in completing projects to strong conflicts between team members, due to the ignorance of cultural diversity, lack of trust, communication impairments. These details should be clearly set from the project planning phase.

Following the rise of globalization in recent decades, there has been an increase in the complexity of international projects with the appearance of the Internet, which has favored the emergence of a new working environment – the virtual environment, with a direct impact on dispersed project teams. Thus, international projects now include new features and dimensions, and the “virtual team” becomes the most representative segment of the “dispersion degree of project teams” dimension (Dumitraşcu, Iulia, Dumitraşcu, D., D., 2015), due to technological innovation, which has offered the necessary means to overcome spatial and temporal barriers of communication and to access talent across borders or continents.

“A virtual work environment is a workplace which is not located in the physical space of anyone. It is usually a network of more jobs connected through technology (through a private network or the Internet), regardless of geographical boundaries. Employees can thus interact in a collaborative environment, regardless of where they are located physically. A virtual environment includes hardware, people and online processes” (<http://research.omicsgroup.org>). This new environment added the ‘virtual’ feature to international projects, imposing a management processes readjustment, adding new challenges on the international project manager list.

If by the advent of the Internet, outsourced collocated project teams, used to communicate via telephone, fax, or through numerous face-to-face extremely expensive meetings, the Internet has enabled a substantial reduction of these costs and even their elimination, transforming these dispersed teams into virtual project teams, enabling organizations to transform technology into a competitive advantage.

The bibliographic research conducted has revealed that the major problem which international project managers are facing is the low success rate of such projects, and the main cause is the insufficient or inadequate project managers’ preparation (see Fig.1).

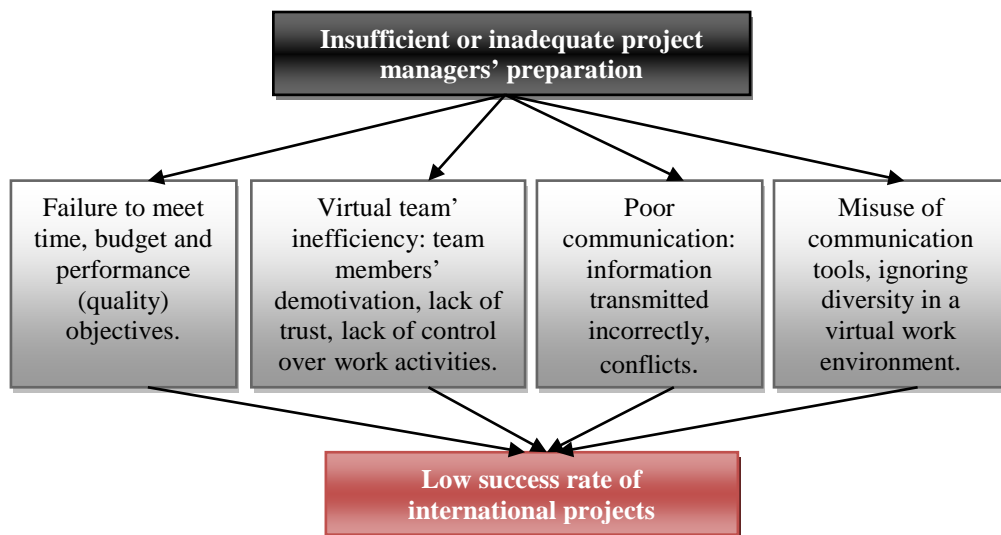


Fig.1. *Consequences of the insufficient or inadequate training of project managers*
Source: Authors

Within international projects, managers must be able to lead and manage projects remotely, based on new communication technologies in a complex environment, characterized by different culture, religion, law, politics, mentalities, resources, time zones, languages. Managers have to lead multicultural teams, while withstanding the pressures regarding constraints of time, cost, quality and stakeholders satisfaction.

Thus, following the bibliographical study conducted, we consider that the main criteria underlying the success of international projects, depending on international project manager' skills and competencies, are:

- A flexible approach to project management that goes beyond the triple constraint.
- Accurate and clear definition of international project goals and objectives, reflecting its scale and complexity.
- International project team members should be selected based on specific skills and abilities established in the planning phase of the project in accordance with its purpose and objectives.
- Effective communication between international project team members, which depends on two important processes: selection of collaborative tools and communication techniques specific to the environment in which the team member's activity takes place, considering also the existing cultural differences.

3. Skills and competences international project managers need in a virtual work environment

Studies on international project managers (Moran T. R., Youngdhal, E., W., 2008.), showed that most are not professional project managers, and only few of them are certified PMI (Project Management Institute). Youngdhal Moran (2008) believes that the abilities of international project managers can be grouped into three competences: the ability to influence cross-culturally and cross-functionally, without using formal authority; the ability of strategic alignment and to add value to the project; the ability to develop and share the project vision. When the competences

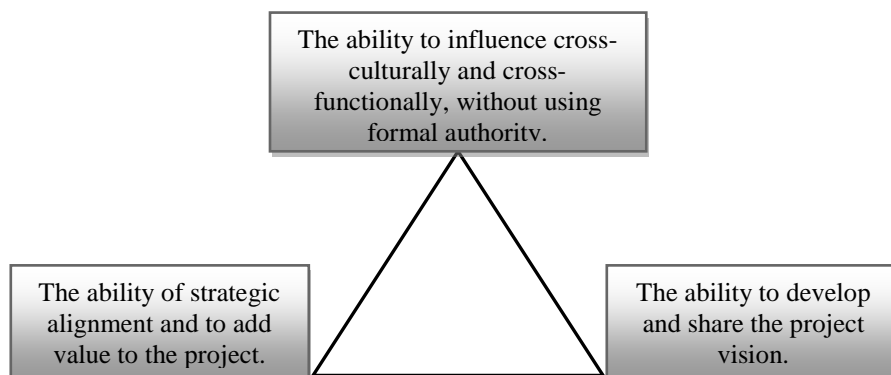


Fig. 2. *International project manager' competences - Moran-Youngdhal Model.*

Source: Moran T. Robert, Youngdhal E. Williams, 2008.

are located within the triangle (Fig. 2), the success is guaranteed. When they are not in the triangle, these must be learned or acquired, otherwise the project will be subject to failure.

Instead, Grisham T.W. (2011) introduces a more complete vision of the skills required, considering that international project managers must have 80% leadership skills (soft skills) and 20% management skills (hard skills) (Grisham, T., W. 2011). “Leadership involves providing direction and motivating others in their tasks and roles to achieve project objectives” (ICB-IPMA Competence Baseline, 2006). Though, “many project managers still rely exclusively on so-called ‘hard’ skills, such as planning, scheduling and controlling, in order to coordinate projects” (Binder, J., 2007).

“Managers often discover that they are inadequately prepared to meet the challenges arising as a result of working with colleagues and clients from different cultures and remote project management” (Goncalves, M., 2005). Thus, they must pay much more attention to ‘soft’ skills: leadership, communication, interpersonal skills, understanding cultural diversity, because the emergence of internet and virtual work environment imposed a greater emphasis on these skills. “Being a team leader represents the most important aspect of the work of a project manager, closely followed by communication skills” (Grisham T. W., 2011).

Managing international teams in the virtual work environment becomes very difficult for managers, because they have to select and lead people, they cannot see; moreover the virtual environment can generate a process of depersonalization, when communication tools are not diversified or misused, causing team members’ isolation, demotivation and unconsolidated bonds between them.

The diversity typical for international project teams is determined, primarily, by multiculturalism, so understanding the cultures they interact with and the differences, is a challenge for project managers, which has to be managed effectively in order to avoid conflicts and to involve team members in the virtual international project goals and purpose. “Many of the virtual teams managers, do not take into account the differences between national cultures, before building the teams, which generates conflicts and poor virtual team performance” (Jones, Nory, B., Graham, C., M., 2015). “Cross-cultural gaps that are typical for international project environment, introduce new challenges for leaders and additional risks” (Friedman Sue, Katz L., 2016).

We have adapted the scheme proposed by Grisham T. W. (2011), to which we added new elements we consider mandatory, mentioned by Settle-Murphy, Nancy M. (2013). So, Fig. 3 is based on the idea of the human brain divided into two hemispheres: the left hemisphere is used to coordinate hard skills - logical activities, organization, analysis, language (words, correct spelling and structure of the message sent); the right hemisphere is used to coordinate soft skills - artistic creativity, intuition, empathy, images, language (paraverbal and nonverbal), etc.

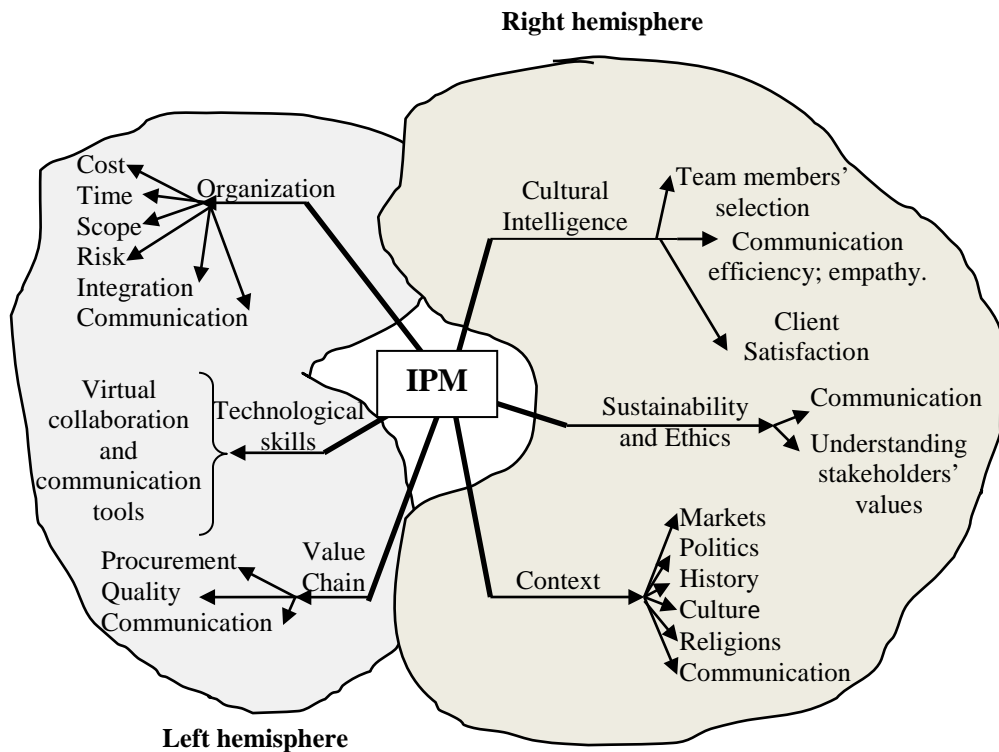


Fig.3. *International project manager's profile* (adapted from Grisham T. W., 2011)

In the corresponding part of the left hemisphere nine categories were assigned, found in PMBOK5 (PMBOK 5th Edition, 2014) and grouped into two areas: the “Organization”, which shall contain - cost, time, scope, integration, project risk management and the specific communication related to these elements - and “Value chain”, which includes procurement management, quality management and specific communication on this category. In addition to the two areas, we added a third area specific to the virtual environment, namely “technological skills”, which refers to the ability of the project manager to “understand the range of collaborative tools and virtual communication, knowing how and when can be successfully used, depending on the project objectives; also he feels comfortable in using a big variety of tools and inspires trust to other project team members in using them” (Settle-Murphy, Nancy, M., 2013).

Regarding the right hemisphere, it includes three areas: “Cultural Intelligence”, “Sustainability and Ethics” and “Context” (Grisham, T., W., 2011), reflecting, primarily, manager's ability to effectively manage diversity within international projects in a virtual work environment.

“Cultural intelligence represents the ability to work effectively in intercultural contexts, including various other national contexts, ethnic, organizational, generational, and more. 90% of leading executives from sixty-eight countries, identified the cross-cultural leadership as the top management challenge for the next century” (Livermore David, 2015). With this ability, the international project manager will be able to build a virtual team based on predetermined international standards regarding the team members’ profile.

The “Sustainability and Ethics” area refers to the fact that project managers must understand and anticipate the effects of their decisions within the project, on all interest groups. Also, their vision has to be a long-term one, to act correctly and consistently, taking into account the experience of the past, the present and anticipate the future effects.

4 Conclusions

We consider that the manager of an international project conducted in a virtual work environment can very easily get, the title of manager of the future, given the growing number of organizations that initiate international projects and rapid technological developments. Considering the topicality of the subject addressed, we believe that a bibliographic research on identifying the skills and competencies of this manager of the future, could lead to an awareness of the differences between the traditional work (face to face) and the international virtual work, contributing to increase the success rate of international projects in a virtual work environment.

The main contributions which this paper brings are given by proposing two representative schemes: Fig. 1 - *Consequences of insufficient or inadequate training of project managers*; Fig. 3 – *International project manager’s profile*. Moreover, this article is the starting point for conducting an empirical research to validate these skills and competences of the international project manager in a virtual work environment.

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