DIGITAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT

How business @ the speed of thought changed the profession…forever

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional project management (PM) as we learned it is gone. The world's emerging digital nervous system has changed the way projects are managed. It has raised the bar in a quantum leap to a level where only the truly modern professional project manager will cope. What has happened and how does that affect the PM fraternity?

1. Digital Nervous Systems (DNS) have changed the world: what happened.

It is true, the world has shrunk! Boundaries and distance seem irrelevant in 1999. We are all armchair spectators of the global arena and most grapple with the deluge of data beamed at us from electronic and other media. Research any subject and you are faced with tens or may be hundreds of thousands of web-sites. It is almost impossible to stay on top of real-time information. It seems that organizations and people are connected as DNS form the backbone of the way the world functions.

The traditional concept of time has changed as the world hurtles along at warp speed. Instantaneous recording and transmittal of data have become the norm. NOW only counts, there is no waiting anymore. Barriers are removed, a thousand at a time. Ordinary people are now trading stocks on Wall Street, e-commerce is becoming the preferred way of trade, virtual auctions are commonplace and you can have a virtual medical examination on line and order medicine in seconds.

Serious corporations all embrace the concept of *Business @ The Speed Of Thought* (William H. Gates III, Warner Books 1999). World markets have been replaced by one global market, made possible by the advent of DNS and the world-wide-web. Corporation XYZ in Minnesota *does* take note of what corporation ABC is doing in Beijing as ABC may

bite into XYZ's market in Minnesota in weeks, not years as before. This is the New World that the project manager functions and it is scary…

2. CUTTING EDGE = SURVIVAL?

Cutting edge technology changes every few months and corporations amplify the mantra "we can only survive if we stay on top of technology." Is this true? E.J. Dionne jr. described having the "edge" as something like being daring (Washington Post 19 September 1999). Being edgy as a combination of "cutting edge" and being on the edge, which means a sharply defined, pointed, not safe outlook or perspective and being out on the ledge. Does this sound like the present day manager? Certainly in the U.S.A. it does – this outlook explains why the business profile and rules have changed so dramatically, and it is only the beginning. It explains the unheard of returns on technology investments and also older paradigms (remember IBM vs Microsoft).

3. SUPER TECHNOLOGY IS COMING OF AGE.

This brings us to the "super technology" coming of age. Consider the development from 1990:

- PC's now and then;
- The advent of palmtops;
- Broadband technology;
- Cheap mass video-conferencing;
- Commonplace ERP's in today's corporation;
- Sophisticated analysis tools (immediate trend analyses);
- And total links (DNS) between businesses, government, individuals etc.

You certainly get the feeling that "big brother" is watching in the U.S.A. Confidentiality and copyright are two of many major victims of "super technology." This has changed the environment that we live and work in. Virtual business is now a reality.

The DNS of a corporation closely links every aspect of the corporation's thoughts and actions – inclusive of all staff members. The corporate IQ is measured by it's IT infrastructure and DNS capability.

4. NEW BUSINESS RULES

Business is instantaneous. The DNS made that possible, partners, suppliers and customers will not have it any other way. No business or entity can function as an island, if you are not a part of the world's digital system, you will not survive. Bill Gates aptly described the emergence of the paperless office. Response time required is immediate. Data capturing is now digital in all industries. Corporations deal only with exceptions in managing the day to day issues. (Yes even Medicare is now considered an industry)."How you gather, manage and use information will determine whether you win or lose" (William H. Gates III).

Marketing time is continuing to shrink. The allowance for errors has vanished, as higher and higher risks become more acceptable. Quick deployment of solutions to problems is not negotiable.

How businesses are judged has also changed. Stock prices are based on "concept.com" where financial performance remains irrelevant for years. Making money has become mind blowing (America's rich under 40's – Fortune) and economists are mystified in trying to explain why the American economy keeps on growing and getting better. Personal wealth has never been so great – for the man in the street that is.

5. THE WAY WE WORK HAS CHANGED

Super technology demands that we produce more and more with less. We are able to be more analytical in our approach. Workers have moved from data collection to value added customer service. Process problems are simplified and fewer people are involved in least hand-offs (Bill Gates). Virtual teams have become common place. Executives are now required to understand and use super technology. This while the world is quickly adapting to the "web-lifestyle."

For the first time management actually has the tools to make re-engineering work – we have only started to use DNS properly.

6. DEMANDS ON HOMO SAPIENS

The above all result in incredible demands on the workforce. Time is getting condensed to the ratio of one 1990 day into 10 1999 minutes. Super technology enables fewer people to do so much more – this while the mind is still trying to adjust to all of this. It is becoming very difficult to keep the "big picture" in mind because of the sheer volume of data flow, which at the same time is contradicted by super technology making it so easy to see the big picture. The result is that people are starting to go beyond human borders of yesterday. The required learning curve is almost vertical as we adjust.

Errors are unaffordable as we try to remain on the edge, which constitutes a basic problem, as we are all too human. This adds to and compounds stress levels. Sounds like a crazy meteor spinning "in control"?

7. MOST DRAMATIC MANAGEMENT REVOLUTION EVER?

Yes. And it is so huge, so fast and so complete.

8. PROJECT MANAGEMENT: WHAT NOW?

Any endeavor in life will start with project management, whether formal or informal. As soon as PM came into the spotlight of corporate culture, super technology changed the world. It has always been difficult to execute PM and in the new environment it is even more so.

Due to the "now" of business, the project manager finds that there is much less time to apply to the most important project phase, i.e. conceptual development. This has been and always will be the Achilles heel of any project. Do conceptual development properly and the project looks after itself. No amount of super technology can ever replace lateral thinking or innovative ideas, however it can make the development process/structuring of a WBS much quicker and easier.

CHALLENGE #1: THE PROJECT MANAGER MUST JEALOUSLY FIGHT FOR AND PROTECT SUFFICIENT TIME FOR CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The "now" in business and super technology floods the project manager with data which in turn requires instantaneous response and analyses. This is possible using super technology provided that the project manager is able to analyze data properly and get relevant information out of it.

CHALLENGE #2: APPLY SUPER TECHNOLOGY TO ENSURE RLEVANT PROJECT INFORMATION IS TRANSMITTED @ THE SPEED OF THOUGHT.

Geographical borders have disappeared, projects are managed by remote control and virtual teams enhance capability. Paper communication, numbers, meetings etc. are replaced by digital transmissions. Much less personal contact is required.

CHALLENGE # 3: NEVER LOSE THE HUMAN TOUCH, THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR ONE ON ONE CONTACT.

Speed, speed and again speed. Quicker as we go. No room for errors. Doing more with less. This result in a tendency to "accept" information and continue. However, human beings do the work and there WILL be errors. There WILL be judgement calls that are wrong. There WILL be disasters.

CHALLENGE # 4: BE ON TOP OF YOUR PROJECT AND ALLOW FOR BEING "EDGY"

A tendency is coming to the fore where "take-out" PM is applied. Corporations go through the motions to "illustrate" that PM is still a part of the management culture. Reams of useless statistics are produced, worthless schedules are updated, and scope changes are justified by "being edgy." And virtual teams are used beyond common sense.

FINAL CHALLENGE # 5: "TAKE-OUT" PM WILL COME BACK TO HAUNT YOU – AVOID IT.

9. HOW DOES THIS AFFECT THE PM FRATERNITY?

We have to be more efficient, many times more efficient. How do we do this? The PM fraternity should start off with changing the old mindset and adapt the "now" mantra in compiling the project plan. We must be "edgy" but only in using super technology to the project's advantage. The project manager's learning process is more important than ever and should never be neglected.

The skills demanded from a project manager in 1999 have dramatically intensified. There is nothing related to a project that should not be part of a basic competence of the project manager. Apart from basic PM skills, it is required that new "unique" skills and understanding be acquired for each project. PM training goes beyond the old paradigm and may sometimes include specific technology transfer on an ad hoc basis. The mental adroitness to do this very quickly will determine who the successful project managers are.

And convincing top management of the increased importance of effective PM will become an increasingly greater challenge to all of us.

10. CONCLUSION

Digital Nervous Systems have changed the world – forever. The way we live and work has changed and will continue to do so and neck-breaking speed. PM has always been quite a challenge is an even bigger challenge today. All endeavors start off with PM. Less time is now available to the project manager to do his job right and the new environment places greater demands on him or her. A mindset is required to adapt to the environment created by super technology. It is not a choice; the project manager must face and resolve several challenges.

This is all happening while the profession is still defining itself. This could be frightening…but then again project managers exactly have what is needed to succeed: the ability to manage change.