



# Star attraction

how can organisations recruit and retain talented project professions? Autumn 2015 issue of Project

**DENNIS SHEEHAN** and **CHRIS JONES** explain

**The demand for project professionals continues to rise and millions of new project management jobs are set to be created globally between now and 2020.**

This has led to a war for talent, so organisations need to prepare to do a lot of recruiting, training and engagement work if they are to win and retain the best project managers. Unfortunately, however, many organisations are failing to make the most of the project managers they already have.

## HOME-GROWN TALENT

There is a widespread lack of recognition of home-grown project management talent – people who are not only good at their jobs but understand the organisation's business environment and contribute effectively to strategic plans.

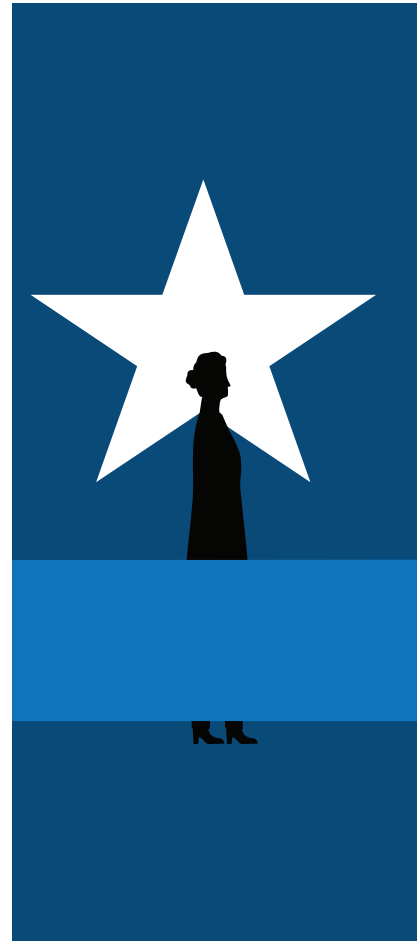
Great project managers are hard to find, yet there is a risk that organisations are letting their star project managers slip through their fingers as a result of a failure to recognise and reward exceptional performance.

A decline in support from management and sponsoring groups who are initially motivated by a new project but become distracted by other important issues often results in project managers feeling isolated and can even lead to project failure with the loss of a clear steer from the top. Project managers who are sidelined will soon look for a more supportive environment.

A failure to recognise there is a new generation in the workforce also leads to retention issues in the project management world. A multi-generational approach to recruitment and engagement should recognise the very different motivations of the generations. At a more senior level, 'baby boomers' (born before 1964) and 'generation X' (born between 1964 and 1980) might respond to more traditional inducements of salary, benefits and bonuses.

The younger 'generation Y' (1980-1995) and the soon-to-be-qualified 'millennials' (born since 1995) respond much more to peer and management recognition in the form of public praise. They also like to be involved with senior level decision-making rather than being constrained by traditional hierarchies. If organisations can create a culture that engages the younger generations, that can go a long way to retaining the emerging stars of project management.

It is vital to strike the right balance when coaching fledgling project managers. Expect new and inexperienced project managers to manage any project, regardless of size or strategic importance, and they may run scared.



■ Take an intelligent approach to recruitment. Don't just blindly fill vacant posts but consider whether to recruit at a lower level and train junior project managers in the ways of your organisation as well as develop their project management skills. Or, use the budget to hire a top-level, charismatic project manager who can lead from the top.  
■ Sell the organisation to potential recruits. Project managers are in a buyer's market.

Good project managers will have a choice of jobs and will want to accept a post that offers something specific to them. That is not just about salary and benefits, although they need to be attractive, but it may also be about company culture and structure, opportunity to travel, and flexible working. Make sure you paint a clear picture of the type of organisation you are.  
■ Engage professionals with training and development. Project

managers are conscious of the need to keep abreast of best practice and to keep their skills fresh. Yes, there is a risk they will do the training and take their new-found knowledge elsewhere. But if the training offered is poor or non-existent, project managers will almost certainly move on.  
■ Foster home-grown talent. Too often organisations buy in expensive consultants when they have the skills and talent in-house or could develop those skills with

the budget they are spending on a week's consultancy.  
■ Maximise the impact of rewards and recognition to retain staff. Acknowledgement for a job well done need not break the budget. A good starting point is a simple 'thank you' in front of peers and management. Professionals may welcome recognition in the form of promotion to a new and more challenging project or the opportunity to lead a project in another country

## CREATE A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR PROJECT MANAGERS



- Define a model for change that suits your company culture, and make sure that the existing and new project managers fit this profile. The Kotter model, for example, asks if it is appropriate for an organisation to operate as an organism or a machine? Are projects delivered organically from a flat organisational structure or is there a top-down chain of command? Will that suit potential new recruits?

- Create a dream team. A project professional is only as good as his or her team. If new teams aren't gelling, consider using personality-profiling tools such as Belbin and Myers-Briggs to work out how to best to build effective teams from the people you have.

- Train the big bosses in project management. Make sure top-level decision makers have at least a basic grounding so that project managers feel supported through a common language and approach.

## CANDIDATES NEED NOT WORRY ABOUT WHAT THEY CAN OFFER YOU, AND ARE IN A STRONG POSITION TO ASK WHAT YOU CAN OFFER THEM

Conversely, not providing challenging projects to more experienced project managers will create difficulty in retaining home-grown project manager talent, as these people will seek more demanding and rewarding positions elsewhere.

### BEST PRACTICE

Project managers will welcome the opportunity to keep their skills up to date and keep ahead with best practice. Organisations face a challenge in identifying which best-practice skills and methodologies their project managers need to develop to achieve the desired outcome. Many organisations are building on basic capabilities by providing further training and development in agile project management and Managing Successful Programmes methodologies.

Senior management teams and key decision makers also need to familiarise themselves with the range of methods, tools and techniques available, and agree with their project managers those that fit best within the context of the organisation's business environment. Selecting the correct approach in this way will also help to ensure that project managers address the principles of project governance in the most appropriate way in all projects assigned to them.

Organisations should also appreciate not only the method that would be appropriate to use in each situation but also that there is a degree of synergy between the methods. They are not - and

never were – mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, most organisations, and even some project management professionals, fail to recognise and take advantage of this.

There are simply not enough project managers out there to meet the rising demand for talent, so organisations that want to attract and retain project managers must take an intelligent approach. In this market, simply advertising and recruiting for bog-standard project management roles is not enough. Organisations need to recognise that, if they want to buy in core project management skills, they must understand candidates' motivation for changing jobs.

Global organisations should not expect to attract the best talent by asking people to move sideways, either in terms of role or salary. Yet so many companies' hiring policies are still designed for a candidate-surplus model that might have been relevant for 2009 but will certainly not work in today's market. The recession is over and your competitors are growing. Candidates need not worry about what they can offer you, and are in a strong position to ask what you can offer them



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