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Diverse talent: Enhancing gender participation in project management

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Abstract

This paper argues that a strategic response prioritising diverse talent as a key resource for delivering projects and programmes will not only enhance project success by increasing skilled project personnel but also ultimately increase women's participation at all levels of project, programme and portfolio management.

The limited number of women in project management has been extensively highlighted - many are disadvantaged and a pay gap exists. Growth in numbers is still painfully slow. Recognising issues has not resulted in wide ranging reviews or a strategic approach to resolve. A collaborative strategy framework to achieve sustained change is proposed.

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1. Introduction

The paper sets out to highlight the challenging context of project management currently and in the foreseeable decade, as the global demand for talented project managers has never been greater and is set to rise. But alongside this forecast growth in the project management profession an existing skills gap (Sheehan and Jones, 2015) is

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already evident. The impact of this ongoing skills gap on the delivery of large complex projects also has an international dimension and global impact.

Parallel with this high demand, is low representation of certain groups amongst project managers. This is marked for one group – women, who still account for at most a third of the profession (PMI, 2013) but in most instances as in the UK (Arras, 2014) only about a quarter of the profession or less. The slow increase in their numbers is frequently highlighted, alongside their limited progression through to senior management (Henderson, Stackman and Koh, 2010).

Bridging this growing skills gap this paper argues is unlikely to be achieved with the ongoing piecemeal response. A strategic approach needs to be adopted to achieve the required growth in numbers and ensure that talented individuals are attracted to the profession and more importantly retained. Fishing in the same pool that has limited representation of certain groups in the past cannot be the only option. Embracing a diverse range of talent will contribute to addressing the huge rise in numbers of project managers required. It will also attract female talent and invariable start to make a difference in female underrepresentation within the profession including at leadership level.

2. The Current Context

2.1 Skills gap

The projected skills deficit in project management and project delivery and its anticipated implication for future infrastructure projects is now regularly highlighted. In its global review and report on the talent gap (PMI, 2013) notes that the demand for project managers and the gap will rise in Europe, India and China. Similarly the PWC (2014) report on construction and infrastructure projects in Sub Saharan Africa notes the anticipated huge increase in infrastructure projects and highlights skills shortage as a key risk in its delivery. The skills gap was also a topical issue at the recent Africa Conference held in Oxford in May 2015. In the UK, (Atkins, 2015) reports that the shortfall in skills will adversely impact product delivery generally as well as the quality of the product, and more specifically add to overall costs and necessitate the need for skills from overseas. But as the skills deficit is already indicated to be a global issue to be addressed in all regions, resolving it requires a sustainable approach.

This cacophony of voices on the skills deficit also highlights the ageing employee base and the need to attract youth. Increasing the numbers of women is also often muted. If these suggested solutions could be easily achieved, the current concern would not exist. Analysing the problem is often more straightforward than implementing a solution.

2.2 Project success

In its recent report on the conditions for project success (APM, 2015) highlights 12 criteria, more than half of them - such as effective governance, goals and objectives recognised by all stakeholders and not being in conflict with secondary objectives, capable sponsors and supportive organisations - are related to people and their behaviours. The report notes that ‘while the key to success is known ... practice is not applied’ (APM, 2015a p.3) resulting in 80% of projects not wholly meeting their objectives. Could this impinge on the project to address the skills gap?

Henderson et al (2010) and others reviewing project failures, have attributed flawed decision making such as poor judgement or assessment of risk as contributing to project failure. Phillips, Liljenquist & Neal (2010) note that diversity improves group decision making. This is an area where diverse teams could contribute to project success.

2.3 Women in project management

In the UK, women in project management account for only about a quarter of the profession (Arras, 2015). Within the Association for Project Management this figure drops to less than 20%. These percentages conceal variances, with lower levels involved in construction and infrastructure projects and increased levels in other

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