

Chapter 60

Managing and Shaping Change in International Projects

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ABSTRACT

Companies are either international by nature, either their workforce is, or business dynamics and agile optimization create an extended web making it international. This obliges managers to gear up for the needs of this evolving DNA. This is especially the case in strategy critical project portfolio contexts focusing on organizational change, process transformation, or roll-out of headquarter-driven products/services. This chapter will address the required hard and soft assets: integrating the cultural essence and maturity of the ecosystem, combining experience with a pragmatic approach, and being dedicated to continuous shaping of collaborations. Additional focus will be set on managing in the digital age. To give more depth to the tangible value, different real-life cases will be integrated. Together, the theoretical insights and the empirical examples will offer a big picture view that will benefit the management of hybrid portfolios in geographically blended environments.

INTRODUCTION

In the current ecosystems, companies are all virtually international: either they are international by nature because of their locations, either their workforce has diverse backgrounds; or their business dynamics lead to global interactions, making it de facto international - even when operating from a single location. This obliges managers of permanent organizations and managers of temporary project organizations to integrate the needs of this international DNA, together with other managerial skills and capabilities.

One specific dimension concerns project portfolios focusing on organizational change, process transformation, or cross-site roll-out of headquarter-driven products. Due to their transversal nature, these types of projects tend to be larger, and are often more influenced by the international footprint of the organization than projects focusing on subject specific matters in an isolated department. In large companies, they are even key for the realization of the strategic backbone, and are fueled by hybrid, international teams.

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A frequent example concerns companies that have grown across different countries (organically or through takeovers) and that want to obtain optimization benefits by standardizing the way of working of all divisions across the different countries. Despite/because of the complexity of the latter, this is often combined with the deployment of a new ERP (that will support the new way of working) and the set up of new organizational roles (to execute the new way of working).

Realizing such corporate undertakings is only possible in a structured and coordinated way. Therefore, companies have to set up temporary project organizations. Leading them well requires more one out-of-the-box solution. To lead them well, international project managers have to master a solid set of complementary hard and soft management skills.

Before unveiling this blended skill and tool set, the essence of project management will first be highlighted, including its importance in international contexts.

Secondly, the practical value of the synchronization with the site/country-specific reality will be analyzed. It will be illustrated that rather than blindly counting on past experience, managers should realize the targets, while integrating the cultural essence. In this sense, a series of tools will be explained that help in evaluating the Change Climate. Doing so will contribute to understanding the identity of local units, independent of eventual regional stereotypes or subjective extrapolations by international managers.

Thirdly, the cultural essence and the maturity of the ecosystem in which international project managers work will be analyzed. Emphasis will be set on hands-on approaches. Reality shows namely that it is more important to respect the spirit of management best practices, than sticking rigorously to the letter.

In complement, it will be stressed that moving forward in international ecosystems implies that managers should go beyond their operational perimeter. Managers have to regularly turn up their sleeves to shape the transversal dynamic, while keeping the strategy and the management philosophy in mind.

Lastly, a specific type of international project shaping will be addressed: contexts involving Digital Transformation. This is an aspect that is very important to keep in mind. The Digital Age is namely fundamentally changing the value proposition to and from the customer. The growing global pressure for companies to adapt entails several risks if the dynamic is not managed correctly. This specific kind of context will therefore be analyzed in detail.

Overall, after completing the chapter, the reader must be able to understand how to manage and shape change in international projects by building upon this blended set of tools and skills.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT: FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

Project management methodologies like PMBOK and Prince 2 refer to a project as a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service based on an agreed upon business case, and with a limited duration (Office of Government Commerce, 2010; Project Management Institute, 2013).

In agile, the definition of a project follows the same idea, as having a start and end date, focused on delivering a product and the likes. Project management as such, however, is organized differently. In some cases, the responsibility is shared between several persons.

From a macro perspective, however, the differences between agile and Waterfall driven programs are negligible. In the further discussion on project matters, the PPM definitions illustrated in Table 1 will therefore be used (Janssens, 2017).

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