

FACT OR FICTION?

Myths have existed since the dawn of time. Predating books, they were often stories told to make sense of things that people didn't understand. While books and cumulative knowledge have since put paid to Hercules *et al*, myths still pervade. In business, project management attracts more than its fair share of myths, not least the 'hero syndrome'. But it is time that these myths are busted, argues **JO RUSSELL**

MYTH:

Project management is not a profession

The fact that project management falls victim to a 'have-a-go' culture in many businesses creates the first oft-cited myth – that project management is not a profession. Rather, the myth goes, it is an approach. Not so, says Vince Hines, managing director at consultancy Wellington Project Management.

"Project management is more and more critical to organisations, and organisations will succeed or fail based on their level of professionalism in project management. There are core competencies needed to do this role that are separate from those of a subject matter expert in that area of the business."

Consider this all-too-familiar scenario, he continues. "A company has a project that goes pear-shaped, and afterwards,

some very senior person says, 'We should have got a professional in.'"

A generic qualification, however, may not be straightforward, points out Caroline Blackman, director of sustainability at construction company Laing O'Rourke. "We work hard to embed project management within the professional qualifications that sit within our industry. If I am working with a [qualified] civil engineer, I would expect one of their core competencies to be project management capability. The ability to manage multiple projects should be recognised as a profession, but it should also be an embedded skill within other professions."

One of the problems is that while project managers may recognise the

professional nature of their role, that recognition is not yet acknowledged widely enough, and therefore it is not protected. Manon Bradley, development director at the Major Projects Association, uses a doctor prescribing treatment to a patient as an example.

"If the patient rejects the treatment and then becomes ill, the medical profession will protect the doctor because it agrees it is the right thing to do in this situation. I'm not sure project management has reached that point. If you say to your project sponsor that, in my professional opinion, we should do a, b and c, and the sponsor rejects those options, you, as a project leader, can still be held responsible for the failure of the project. That is a dangerous position to be in." ►

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MYTH:**PROJECT PROFESSIONALS DON'T NEED TRAINING**

Closely aligned to the level of professionalism is the myth that training isn't necessary to be a project manager – hands-on experience will do.

Bradley continues her medical analogy: "You wouldn't go to a doctor who had 'training by experience' on their CV. It is legitimate and reasonable for someone thinking about appointing a project manager to ask for that proof."

There is also value in reaffirming what you know. "It's a beneficial process to sit down and think what you know about something, to reflect and have it in your armoury, rather than act in the heat of the moment," she says.

Hines, meanwhile, is emphatic. "People are not born as project managers," he says. "There is a best practice way to run projects and there are sophisticated tools for doing so." To understand how these can be used most effectively, training is required. That is not to say that there is no room for experience, however.

"You can't consider yourself a project manager unless you have scars on your back," says Corrina Jorgensen, managing director of change management consultancy Afiniti. "You need to know the method, but not be wedded to it."

**WHAT ARE THE TOP 10 MYTHS
IN RISK MANAGEMENT?
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MYTH:**Project management is only relevant to infrastructure and IT**

The number of myths that exist around project management is partly due to the increasing number of businesses that are becoming project-oriented. But this growing number helps to burst another myth – that project management is only relevant to infrastructure or IT projects.

Blackman's roots are in the car industry, where any form of product development was a project. Now at Laing O'Rourke, she sees much the same.

"We have a project management ethos, as everything we do is relevant to a project. Projects have clearly defined outcomes and goals, timelines and dependencies on each other, and therefore, no matter what expertise or function you are, you have to contribute to that project." While project management is clearly a core competency within construction, she believes it applies in the same way across all other functions.

The myth may stem from the very visible, tangible nature of infrastructure projects, such as a large building or bridge, compared with more discreet

projects in other sectors. Susie Boyce is project management director at biopharmaceutical services provider Quintiles. She believes that the discipline of project management applies to all industries, but people are just not as aware of the role that it plays.

"I encountered someone who gave me insight into this role when I was a fresh graduate," she explains. "It allowed me to tap into a whole different world and see where I could make a difference. People need to be brave enough to expand their horizons and see where their skills as a project manager could make that difference – and it's probably not an industry they would have thought of."

Traditionally, people may have drawn a distinction between IT and the business, isolating IT as a project in itself, but that is an archaic view, argues Hines. "The new way of working has to be that there is one project that has an IT and business element, run either by a business project manager or an IT project manager with a business project manager as stream lead."

MYTH:**Projects need process and paperwork more than people**

Another myth worthy of busting is that projects are about process and paperwork, and 'let's worry about the people later'. The people aspect of a project is too often seen as the poor relation of process and systems, believes Jorgensen.

"Process and systems have a higher profile, since they are more structured and predictable, whereas the people aspect is much less scientific and seen as more 'hearts and minds'," she explains. The resultant benefits are much harder to quantify, and can come long after the project has gone live, meaning that project managers are not targeted or rewarded, based on delivery of those benefits.

There is a wealth of research, she adds, "showing better employee engagement leads to better productivity and performance. If you do all the right things to bring your people with you, you have a much higher chance of success. People

need to be put up front into the heart of the programme. We need to make people the same priority and apply the same level of rigour to setting up a people work stream as to process and systems."

Myth also has it that introducing project management methodology creates bureaucracy, forms and unnecessary process, while a project management office is a burden and an overhead that fails to add value. Both statements might be true if done badly. If done correctly, they are "absolute bunkum", states Hines.

"The key words are scalable, practical and fit for purpose. What is needed is a consistent approach suitable to the organisation, not a one-size-fits-all." He adds: "If a project is very large, we need to do more scoping and risk management. If it is smaller, do something that is scaled to fit that scale of project, rather than a 30-page scoping document."



MYTH OR REALITY:

PROFESSIONALS WHO WANT TO GET TO THE TOP OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT HAVE TO BE MALE

"I have been doing this job for 10 years and, in that time, the proportion of women who are in senior positions delivering major projects has not increased," says Bradley. This is not, she believes, because the people hiring into senior positions believe that men are better than women. It is more that, "in order to be successful, there is an element of self-sacrifice. Major projects are so big and all-encompassing that they are not nine-to-five jobs". As such, many women are put off applying for the top roles.

Bradley believes that not enough effort has been put into staffing and managing people in projects. Job sharing is not tricky – it just requires better communication. "If you can manage to cut a tunnel under

London within x feet of an escalator and get it right without injury, you can manage a job-sharing role."

Boyce offers a differing view: "I haven't encountered that [men in the top job] barrier – quite the opposite. We are fortunate to have a number of senior leaders who are female. I am always happy to share my knowledge or act as a coach or mentor, or make introductions, which is often half the battle. You need to have those sponsors in your world and to be well connected and networked. I have always taken the opportunity, when I have encountered female project managers that I have felt inspired by, to ask them for help or to reach out and connect with them."

MYTH:

Projects need heroes

The final myth – for the purposes of this article at least – is that project professionals need to be heroes who run in to put out the fire and save the project – if not the world – at the eleventh hour. Much of the time, it is the project professionals themselves who are creating the fire and thriving on the adrenaline it produces. This is known as the 'hero syndrome', where individuals thrive on the recognition that they get from resolving an apparently desperate situation.

"It is energising leaving everything to the last minute, to get it across the line. A lot of people like that. It brings chaos, but it creates team spirit," says Blackman.

"The challenge is creating that energy and adrenaline, but in a more planned way, with fewer peaks and troughs, but still with opportunities to celebrate success. We have a responsibility to train people, not to create the people chaos."

"When project management is done well, you don't see heroes," says Boyce. "It is more about quietly moving things through in a controlled way, almost unnoticeably." Which makes sense for projects, if not for Hollywood film scripts. ■

THE BEST (OR WORST) OF THE REST OF THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT MYTHS

- Once the project starts, it is difficult to stop or end it.
- Social media is irrelevant to projects.
- Failure is always bad.
- The customers know what they want.
- Project management is about producing documentation.
- Planning is a waste of time – execution is everything.
- Projects don't need a properly articulated business case.

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