

The future of Project and Program Management. Foresight workshop

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Abstract

Foreseeing the future is a key input in defining governmental policies, business strategies and professional development plans. Our World is changing rapidly in many different areas: social, technical, political, economical, environmental, organizational, etc. Different methodologies involving a group of persons with knowledge on a subject have shown that they are useful at generating valuable foresight about the subject.

What will the role of Project Management (PM) and Program Management (PgM) be in the future?

This article presents the **basis for a workshop** with project managers to address this question. It will be held at PMI North America Global Congress Vancouver October 2012. Key questions about how PM might evolve the future will be addressed in this workshop. Starting with historical and trend information, brain-storming activities, group discussions and by using the Delphi technique we will attempt to anticipate our future World and the role and key aspects of PM.

Workshop participants will have the opportunity to:

- get involved in the task of foreseeing the future
- get concise information to begin the process
- learn from their own perceptions and those of other colleagues
- identify key factors that could impact the future and get ready to monitor their evolution as triggers for change
- obtain more insights to manage their own strategic decisions
- enjoy!

Introduction

It seems like clocks are accelerating and changes are happening quicker and quicker. “Everything changes, nothing stays but change” is a common perception. In such a situation, governments, companies, institutions and individuals need to figure out the future in order to take decisions. And Foresight activity makes more sense than ever. But in the future it is expected to become even more critical.

Foresight (or forecast)

We should remember that “forecasting” is predicting that an event will happen, to a defined extent, and sometimes with a defined probability. Forecasts are usually applied to short-term futures - no more than a few years ahead. A forecast is considered to be less certain than prediction, but more certain than conjecture or anticipation. “Foresight” is a broad term covering all methods of envisaging the future, but with an emphasis on the alternative futures concept. However, forecasting is not normally included as a part of foresight (Cornish, 2004)

Foresight is applied to many different fields such as: economics, marketing, climate change or health.

Tools and Techniques

Different methods are used to run a foresight session with a group of experts:

- Brainstorming
- Group discussion
- Voting/Rating
- Trend Analysis
- STEEP (Social, Economical, Environmental, Technological, Political) analysis
- Scenarios
- Delphi surveys

The first 3 methods (Brainstorming, Group discussion and Voting/Rating) are well known. They all support ways of extracting conclusions from a group of persons with different or complementary points of view. Trend and STEEP analysis help to figure out different aspects of the possible future situation configuring different possible Scenarios. Delphi surveys allow quantitative estimation of magnitudes such as: the probability of a scenario, the population in an area, the production of certain raw material or the life expectancy.

In the standard version of Delphi surveys, the experts answer questionnaires in two or more rounds. After each round, a facilitator provides an anonymous summary of the experts' forecasts from the previous round as well as the reasons they provided for their judgments. Thus, experts are encouraged to revise their earlier answers in light of the replies of other members of their panel. It is believed that during this process the range of the answers will decrease and the group will converge towards the "correct" answer. (Delphi Method, 2012)

Organizations

There are many organizations whose primary focus is on foresight activities. The following are a few examples of each type:

- Governments: Foresight (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/foresight>)
- Multinational institutions: European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) (<http://ipts.jrc.ec.europa.eu>)
- Non for Profit: Club of Rome (www.clubofrome.org)
- Corporate departments: Most big companies cover this activity as part of strategy
- Companies providing foresight studies on specific subjects

Megatrends

In 1982 Naisbitt & Aburdene published the number-one bestseller "Megatrends" predicting different key aspects worldwide that would evolve during the 90's (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1982). By 2011 Lowell D'Souza published "6 Naisbitt Megatrends that held up in 2011". He was surprised that 6 out of 10 predictions held up pretty well (D'Souza, 2011). Women becoming leaders, the Growth of Biotechnology and the Asia Pacific area development were some of them.

In 1990 John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene published "Megatrends 2000 ten new directions for the 1990's" predicting the shift from an industrial to an informational economy, the booming 1990s and the power of High Tech (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990).

In 2005 Patricia Aburdene published "Megatrends 2010: The Rise of Conscious Capitalism" highlighting the importance of ethics, trust, integrity and social responsibility as key factors for the future success of companies and economies (Aburdene, 2005). In the last few years we have seen different situations supporting Aburdene's predictions. Those situations have resulted in the economical crisis we are undergoing Worldwide: corporate scandals, risky financial operations determining a deepening crisis of the banking sector, inadequate control policies from governments spending excessively.

Other authors have proposed their own megatrends models that can inspire the insight about the future in a certain aspect.

Foresighting PM & PgM

Three elements support the framework in developing the workshop:

- Information about major general trends for the World in general and possible scenarios (outlined in the previous “Megatrends” epigraph)
- The history of PM & PgM (outlined later)
- Current trends in PM & PgM (to be brainstormed as part of the workshop)

The history of PM & PgM

It is not my intention to develop a formal study on this point. Let me simply bring up some meaningful examples illustrating how old PM & PgM are. I do not have any hard data about how formalized those activities may have been.

Project management probably started in the ancient times of human beings. Homo Sapiens lived about 150.000 years ago. They were able to work in teams to achieve objectives impossible for a single individual. They were organized as a society.

The Great Wall of China is more than 6,000 Km long, with 5 to 8 meters (16–26 ft) in height, and 5 to 6 meters (16-20 ft) wide. A huge number of tons of stone to move when human beings still used very limited sources of energy apart from human strength or animals. Many resources and activities were organized and coordinated in its construction. When considering Egyptian pyramids we can find a similar situation.

During The Roman Empire expansion, The Romans constructed roads, bridges and later many other impressive buildings. That is, several projects with one common goal and shared resources.

During the 20th Century PM evolved in a faster way than it had ever done before. Technological progress has been one of the triggers. It has facilitated PM & PgM activities and has supported a very active sharing of ideas and best practices. As part of this process PMI was founded in 1969.

Current trends in PM & PgM

Let us keep in mind the history that brought us here. Identifying what is happening right now and how it is evolving provides valuable information to foresee the future. That can cover the first steps of our movement forward and indicate possible directions it could take.

There are many relevant sources on this topic. Simply search for “Project Management trends” on the Internet and you will get many ideas. Some of them focusing on PM & PgM methodology and how they are done (Stanleigh, 2011) others, like the PMI blog entry “7 Project Management Trends to Watch” (Srinivasa, 2012) also include aspects such as fields were PM is not today and could be tomorrow.

“Project Management Circa 2025”, with the collaboration of 41 authors, presents predictions about PM in 2025 (Cleland & Bidanda, 2009).

The foresight workshop design

INPUTS

- Historical and recent information
 - o Human history (road-map from first humans)
 - o Project Management
- Current trends
 - o for the World (different studies)
 - o for PM
- Expert judgment (the audience)
- Results from previous research

TOOLS & TECHNIQUES

Certain combination of the following tools & techniques will be used depending on the number of participants and groups and on the time available:

- Brainstorming
- Group discussion
- Voting/Rating
- Trend Analysis,
- STEEP (Social, Economical, Environmental, Technological, Political) analysis
- Scenarios
- Delphi surveys

OUTPUTS

- Specific year to foresee
- Weighted list of questions regarding PM for this future year
- List of key STEEP aspects influencing PM for that future year
- Possible scenarios for PM for that future year
- If possible because of time available: First quantitative estimation of the probability of every scenario

One step further

PM & PgM will be affected by the changes in other fields (i.e. economy or technology). At the same time, both of them are “the tools for change”, the way to apply innovation or to reconfigure organizations. PM & PgM are not only affected by the changes in our World but, are undoubtedly, actively configuring the future. This approach is complementary to the workshop main focus which is the impact of Global World changes in PM.

“Future-aligners” aim to work on themselves to be ready for the future, while “future-influencers” aim to work on the world. Lombardo reminds us that “without self-responsibility, one sees oneself as a victim and incapable of influencing the future.” (Lombardo, 2010, pp34-42) (Hejazi, A., 2011)

Final question-. How can project management and we, project managers, contribute to configure a better world?

Next steps following the Workshop

The information generated in the workshop will be compiled and elaborated to generate a document of results to be shared later. They will be published and, very likely, will serve as the basis for launching a second study on the web with participants worldwide.

The “Final question” in the previous epigraph could also be incorporated to the second study.

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