
You get what you ask for...

This is the Fourth Law of Project Management, and, like the previous laws, should be interpreted in a positive way. It means that we should all sharpen up when we ask for resources to work on our project.

I have worked as a contractor many times in my life, and I have lost count of the number of times I was proposed badly (by the agency), interviewed badly (by the project manager), and then simply stuffed into a project plan with little or no research into my skills or aspirations.

However, one shining example sticks in my mind as proof that it can be done. I had been working at Oracle as a contract project manager, running my own project. It came to an end, and Oracle asked if I would like to stay on and transfer to another project, to be a member of the support team of a global project. It was not a big transfer, as I had been sitting next to the support team for 3 months. I knew them all, and they knew me.

But the project manager took no chances. On my first day working for her she said, at 9:15, 'come on Mike, I'll buy you a cup of coffee'.

We went down to the coffee shop and she invested £1.50 and 30 minutes of her time in 'just a chat'. She knew the skills I had been demonstrating at Oracle, and she asked me to join her project based upon that knowledge, but she wanted to find out what else I had. In just a few minutes she had identified that I also 'did training', and within 2 weeks I was on the plane to Australia to run a training course.

Sometimes it is easier to manage people whom you don't know, because you might just make some effort to get to know them. People whom we do know we sometimes take for granted, and miss opportunities.

So, if we must sharpen up when we ask for resources, what should we ask for?

I suggest that there are 5 dimensions to every team member that might need to be specified, namely Technical Knowledge, Other Skills, Authority, Availability, and Belbin Profile. Not every resource needs to be specified in such detail, but many will.

The first one we can specify quite easily by looking at our emerging project plan and identifying the technical nature of the task itself. We might need to be realistic about issues such as trainee versus expert, but the schedule will help us. The plan will also be the source of our requirements in all the dimensions.

So, what 'other skills' might we wish to ask for? Well, it obviously depends on the type of project, but the list will include business knowledge or technical knowledge specific to the

project environment, language skills, presentation skills, leadership ability, location and so on.

Authority is an interesting dimension. In the last 10 years or so we have seen the rise of various methodologies to govern so-called rapid application development projects, from DSDM through to Scrum. Every one of these has one point in common; they all insist that the key users embedded in the project team have the authority to make project- and product-related decisions on the spot, without recourse to time-consuming committees, focus groups and the like. If no such empowered users are available, the project should proceed according to more traditional lines, as RAD might be too dangerous. Many projects outside this narrow category could take a leaf out of this book. Maybe we need to specify exactly what types of decisions we expect the users to make during the project, and look for people with the appropriate authority.

Availability should be easy to specify, as we have our project schedule in front of us. However, my point here is that maybe we could be a little more realistic in our demands. Yes, it is easier to manage full-time project resources, but by asking for full-time team members we may be placing the line management under strain to release key people full-time. It may be quicker in the long run to go for part-time resources (which may be available now) rather than wait for full time later.

Finally, I think we should make more use of Belbin profiles. For those of you who are not familiar with Belbin profiles let me say that there is nothing particularly magic about them, but they are very useful in project planning. A personal Belbin profile describes the strengths and weaknesses that an individual is bringing to your project. This can be quite specific, but for a project manager trying to assign tasks to individuals the Belbin profile could provide valuable insights into a team member's strengths.

For example, in Belbin terms I score very low as a Completer/Finisher. This means that I have poor attention to detail. If you have to assign me to a task that requires a lot of concentration on details then we are going to be unlucky, unless we can come to some arrangement about dividing the work into very small bites, with a 'break' in between. The break doesn't have to be a coffee break; another type of task could allow me to refresh my concentration. A task might take me longer than someone who scores highly in this Belbin strength, but it's no good just shouting at me telling to concentrate – I cannot.

Belbin strengths are a mixture of task and people strengths. The overriding premise behind the analysis is that we are who we are, and a project manager should use the strengths that individuals have, rather than moan because the person assigned to his project is 'not the right type'.

Of course, just because we might understand the strengths we need (from the schedule) and have a clear idea of the strengths available doesn't mean that there will be a perfect match. Sometimes we might have to use Belbin as a risk assessment tool, looking for serious resource mismatches.

I am sure that we can sharpen up when identifying our resource requirements, and if we take the Fourth Law of Project Management another way, 'Don't ask, don't get'.