

Developing the 'Reflective Practitioner'

Summary Report of the Findings from an Undergraduate Dissertation Research Project

Stuart Murray, University of Strathclyde, 2008

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Key Insights

- **Soft skills are not simply required to deliver successful projects; they improve project managers' abilities to learn on the job and support their continual development.**
- **60.3% overall of those surveyed said that learning by experience was the most useful form of learning, a clear majority over formal courses which were seen as most useful by less than 10%.**
- **56% of respondents considered self awareness and reflection to be critical for their development as a project manager and a further 38% felt that it was important.**
- **70% of respondents believed soft skills could be learned.**
- **People's perceptions of an experience are influenced by the information they are able to gather about it, therefore affecting the insights and lessons learned from reflecting on each experience.**
- **Those who are able to gain a better understanding of their environment and who are able to relate this back to themselves are more successful.**
- **Soft skills underlie a PM's capacity to learn, with development creating a snowball effect which accelerates the accumulation of knowledge and ability to perform.**
- **It is not the quantity of experience a project manager gains; it is the quality of their experience that counts.**

Contents

- **Outline of Research**
- **The Context for Soft Skills in Project Management**
 - **Model of Factors Involved in Experiential Learning**
- **Explaining the Soft Skills link**
 - **What do we mean by 'soft skills'?**
 - **Reflection as a 'good' thing**
 - **The Quality of Reflection - Clearing the mist from the mirror**
 - **Do we limit ourselves to our own experiences?**
 - **Training a bunch of softies**
- **Conclusions**
- **Acknowledgements**
- **Access to Results Online**
- **Summary Data Tables**

Outline of Research

Purpose of the Research

The research was designed to explore the possible contributions of 'soft skills' to developing project managers, evolving to consider the impact of such skills on experiential learning and, in particular, reflection. The research explored current issues involved in developing project managers. From a phenomenological perspective the researcher entered into the subject with an open mind and used a process of guided inquiry via the literature to help explore a potential gap in the theory. Although the research purpose was not to measure a given relationship or explicitly test theory, the research included quantitative analysis to provide some empirical support as a basis on which to argue for the impact of soft skills in the experiential learning process.

Interview Results

19 people were interviewed in the first stage of research. Those interviewed were all highly experienced project managers who held senior positions within large organisations or directed their own company. The length of the telephone interviews averaged 52 minutes with the shortest interview taking 36 minutes and the longest lasting for 1 hour and 15 minutes. In total 16 hours and 30 minutes of calls were recorded.

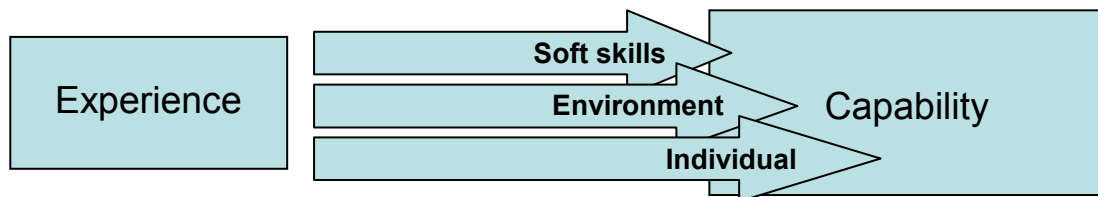
Survey Results

Two surveys were sent out online to a potential pool of around 3000 people and generated a total of 200 responses (a revised edition of the survey with extra quantitative questions was sent out shortly after the first). An approximate response rate of 5.5% is in accordance with expectations and while being low in nominal terms, it represents a significant pool of data for a qualitative study. Only 5% of respondents had 2 years or less experience in projects with the majority of those participating (45%) with more than 10 years experience (see Sample Statistics at end). While most respondents came from the UK, some were from Australia and the rest of the world. Approximately 70% of those that disclosed their gender were male. For the open ended questions, the qualitative data was compiled and generalised in to a more quantifiable form and it should be noted that this involved general classifications by the researcher where his discretion was used to interpret meaning.

The context for 'soft skills' in Project Management

From the interpretation, the results broadly align with much of the existing theory and reveal the potential for further study within this work's specific scope. The results of the interviews were used to shape the following construct below (see fig.1). Illustrated by this model are 3 important factors (the Individual, the Environment and Soft Skills; displayed in terms of potential impact) involved in the development of project managers. The survey results served to support this model and supplemented the information gathered from the interviews. The table has been used here to briefly outline the important areas which emerged from the research in relation to experiential learning. Each topic in the table has significant consequences or potential benefits to a project manager in a number of different ways.

Fig. 1 Model of Factors Involved in Experiential Learning



Sources of Experience	Individual	Environment
<p>Personal Experience Broad range of experience</p> <p>Success <i>and</i> failure</p> <p>Relevant or technical experience</p> <p>Life experience</p> <p>Other's Experience Professional associations and societies</p> <p>Colleagues</p> <p>Networks</p>	<p>Characteristics Attitude and motivation</p> <p>Reflective</p> <p>Learning Style</p> <p>Behaviours Brings past experience into current context</p> <p>Actively seeks out new experiences</p> <p>Listens / Asks Questions</p> <p>Applies and adapts ideas</p>	<p>Project Role requirements</p> <p>Working conditions</p> <p>PM Processes</p> <p>Organisation Employee development processes</p> <p>Knowledge management systems</p> <p>Career planning</p> <p>Organisational culture</p>

This summary does not go into detail here about these factors (most have been discussed and analysed in other studies) but how they impact on a project manager and how they relate or fit together can be thought of as the foundation or context for the following discussion on soft skills and their impact on experiential learning. As the diagram illustrates the most important factor is the individual – project managers themselves have the biggest impact in the relationship. The environment that the project manager is exposed to is the second biggest consideration as determined by the organisational and project context. Thirdly, the results support the idea that learning is affected by the level of soft skills displayed by a project manager. By developing an argument around this third point we hope to provide a new position from which to evaluate the benefits of soft skills and to place them firmly on the agenda of those working within Project Management.

Explaining the Soft Skills Link

People skills of one description or another are found in almost all modern competency frameworks and are by no means a new subject within Project Management. Numerous studies in the past have already attempted to define these skills and assess the link between a project manager's soft skills

and their performance. In this study, however, we take a different perspective on soft skills, concentrating on the learning and development of project managers rather than the implementation of successful project management. Presented here is affirming, qualitative evidence of the impact of soft skills on experiential learning.

What do we mean by 'soft skills'?

For the purposes of this research, the term 'soft skills' was used to categorise skills in a different way from many other definitions, being defined as: the set of behaviours and actions which someone can develop to attain a better understanding of themselves and other people in the environment within which they operate. Using a general, bespoke definition of 'soft skills' for this research seemed appropriate as no other definition captured what the researcher was trying to explore in the right way. In many ways this definition aligns with some constructs of Emotional Intelligence (Salovey and Mayer 1990, Goleman 1995) but the foundations of EI are fiercely contested and some writers have suggested that the EI construct is itself better understood as a set of skills (Locke 2005). More importantly the definition allowed for its meaning to emerge from the research, rather than be presupposed, and as a result **'soft skills' can be described as: *the skills which can be developed to raise an understanding of ones' self and of those around you.***

The survey explored whether these interpersonal abilities could be developed and/or if they were purely an outcome of someone's personality or traits. **44% of respondents said that the soft skills could be learned.** The two other main types of response suggested that people skills could be learned 'to some extent' (23%) or that people "either had it or they did not" (30.2%). Included in 'soft skills' could be, among others, such skills as self-awareness, communication, networking, understanding emotion, team working, conflict resolution, etc. The results do not specify all the skills that would be included as soft skills nor do we attempt to place weighted importance on which skills would be of the greatest impact. However, this research can support the notion that developing key soft skills (not be confused with training or certification alone) would be potentially very valuable with direct impact on a project manager's ability to learn from or function effectively within a project environment.

Reflection as a 'good' thing

The idea of the "reflective practitioner" was used by Winter et al. (Re-Thinking Project Management, 2006) developing the idea put forward by Schön (1983). They argue that with 'experience, intuition and the pragmatic application of theory' project managers are able to deal with the ambiguous and complex nature of projects. Reflection is crucial in many established models of learning. Experiential learning as described by Kolb (1984) follows a cycle of experience, observation, reflection and testing of abstract concepts generated from the process. Learners form ideas, make assumptions and construct a version of reality based upon what they perceive. Applying this to project management where experiences are dynamic and the environment is changing, with little scope to test new concepts in the same situation; experiential learning for project managers is not just crucial (Crawford

et al. (2000) suggest **85% of PMs gained their knowledge through experiential learning**) but extremely challenging. Essentially the people who work in the type of complex, uncertain environment which demands continuous learning most are also faced with the most difficult working circumstances to take advantage of experiential learning.

Despite this, the survey found that 60.3% of participants said that **learning by experience was the most useful form of learning** for them, a clear majority over formal courses which were seen as most useful by less than 10%. The survey sought to provide data on the perceived importance of self-awareness and reflection for a project manager's development. **56% of respondents considered self awareness and reflection to be critical for their development as a project manager and a further 38% felt that it was important.** A much smaller group described them as desirable (5%) and less than 1% of respondents thought that they were not relevant to their development at all. Interestingly, those with the most experience valued "reflection" more importantly than those with less experience (65% with experience of over 20 years viewed it as 'critical' while this was 48% for 10-20 years).

The survey also looked at how the respondents then used self awareness and reflection and the results were able to suggest some specific benefits of using reflection to improve PM performance. The table below shows some of the responses to the question, "How has understanding yourself helped you learn from your experiences?" (Figures are the actual number of responses – percentages not appropriate).

• Able to assess strengths and weaknesses	45
• Highlights ways of improving performance	43
• Can understand the effects of your behaviours on others	19
• Able to understand the ability and behaviours of others more	19
• Able to predict how you are likely to react in future situations	11
• Able to identify problems or difficulties quickly	11
• Provides confidence in yourself	10
• Being critical maintains an accurate self perception	9

Our results sit alongside an abundance of literature which supports the idea that reflection is a good thing but we have to note that, especially for project managers, it is difficult to do in the first place, let alone get the most from it (refer again to the environment section of the model for specific environmental factors). Even though people might accept that reflection is beneficial how they then value and use reflection clearly differs. I would argue that most project managers only take on board a small proportion of what could be learned from their experiences as a result of not being willing or able to reflect on their experiences effectively.

The Quality of Reflection - Clearing the mist from the mirror

Findings from early reading and our own personal experience led us to adopt the assumption that people's perceptions will be influenced by how much they understand of their situation or given experience. At the heart of this assumption is the fact that very often people do not recognise some of the factors at play in a given situation and so this affects the insights and lessons learned from each experience. Discussions in the interviews about top performers very often implied that those who were able to gain the best understanding of their environment and who were able to relate this back to themselves were more successful than their peers. These individuals were able to learn quickly, adapt quickly and perform in situations different to the ones they had seen before.

We would argue that people who have developed excellent soft skills are able to build a fuller 'picture' of the experiences they encounter than someone with 'poor' soft skills. Top performers are able to see through the ambiguous, complex 'mist' surrounding projects and pick out the reasons why a project was such a success, why the team showed so much spirit for that last one, or why the project was such a terrible mess. For these situations, it is no surprise soft skills are so important. So often the underlying factor determining the outcome of a project and its success is related to the same thing, people.

So much of a project manager's role is based on the management of relationships. Learning how to do this well is no easy task and takes time. **Building, maintaining and managing relationships are a large part of the picture for a project manager.** Although there are undoubtedly some people who have a natural talent or aptitude for this, almost everyone interviewed agreed that their own 'people' skills had significantly improved over time – regardless of their initial abilities. For example, a better understanding of oneself helps to develop a better understanding of others and this seems to grow naturally. The interviewees described how they act differently now compared to when they started working, often with complete changes in behaviour to suit certain situations because they recognise that there may be a more appropriate style they could use to motivate their team or engage stakeholders, for example. There seemed to be a tone of "If only I knew then what I know now" showing through when people reminisced. The sooner you know where you are going wrong the sooner you can fix it. Soft skills are the basis for project managers being able to observe and understand those around them. Evidence from the interviews showed that **over time each of the project managers got better at making sense of what was going on.** They found they were able to appreciate things which they used to miss and by doing so took more from each new experience. This occurred naturally for these project managers over time. One analogy for thinking about this would be to view an increase in soft skills acting as an upgrade to your ability to reflect, like an upgrade to the spy-ware on your computer, allowing you to identify more deeply rooted problems or bugs which, with less sophisticated software, previously went unnoticed. The best thing about this upgrade, however, is that with each new experience, every new insight, managers themselves are adding to a cumulative store of knowledge and expertise which self perpetuates or even accelerates the rate at which they are able to learn and perform. **With learning comes an even greater**

capacity to learn. They learn what they were going to learn tomorrow anyway, except they learn it today.

Do we limit ourselves to our own experiences?

Until now we have looked at the benefits of soft skills to understanding our own experiences and generating our own learning but it must be recognised that much of what there is to know has already been learned. Those more experienced than us hold a wealth of information that guides them and contributes to their performance. Without going into the depths of organisational learning, I would argue briefly that soft skills also give us better direct access to secondary sources of experiential learning, bundled up as tacit knowledge, intuition or experience in those we work with. Formal networks and communities of practice developed by organisations which are designed to tap into the knowledge held by the organisation as a whole received little backing for being an effective means of developing project managers in this research. This was attributed to failures in their implementation although they were still seen as another potentially 'good' thing. Organisational efforts recognise the value of the knowledge that is out there, but for the moment it is the individual who has to go and get it.

One study on electrical technicians showed that **those who were more sociable and showed good team working skills performed better than their less sociable peers.** This was directly attributed to the fact they were able to gain more knowledge through shared experiences and "war stories". We are talking about simple skills which can be developed like listening and building rapport. Even an appreciation of how and why people can make an effort to use these skills could have an impact. In the same way, demonstrating the power of networking and developing managers' abilities to build a professional network would allow individuals to draw on a broad pool of knowledge as a professional source of advice, information and support. Much support for professional networks was given by the interviewees. 'Observation of others' was reported as being the most useful way to learn by more women than men (16% of women compared to 7% of men). If any of the stereotypes are to be believed about the soft skills being slightly feminine, then perhaps you could argue the case that women, with a better grasp of their soft skills, are indeed more confident and effective at learning through observation – reflecting upon and internalizing the lessons of others, rather than relying on their own experience or formal courses as opportunities to learn. If this is so then some of us are holding ourselves back by not giving due attention to focusing on the softer side of Project Management.

Training a bunch of 'softies'

The final thought to be touched upon should discuss the potential impact of these ideas. Although there are many considerations to be handled, the most important may be that of the general perception of soft skills themselves. Many authors in the field state that the "soft skills are the hard skills" in the sense that they are the most difficult skills to develop and we would have to agree. Investment in soft skills is difficult to measure and quantify. There are no hard and fast rules which

can be easily learned. Most of us cannot agree on what we even mean by soft skills. Many of the discussions used in the interviews purposefully prompted a response to the term 'soft skills' to explore its general meaning – showing a lack of consistency between ambiguous definitions for the term. I have been careful to try and explain what I mean by 'soft skills' but the label does no favours for the cause. One interviewee raised just such a concern and offered a more tangible, credible labelling of soft skills referring to them as 'Human and Organisational Competencies' (M. Price). Another suggestion put forward for the same reason was 'Personal Mastery' as used by Shell. These labels represent the people skills more effectively and arguably are more accessible for project managers to buy in to thanks to them being a little less fluffy, sold as necessary competencies required for successful project management. Soft skills, like any project, need the right sponsorship by management and need to be championed by those involved in developing them to realise any benefit.

Conclusions

We have demonstrated that there is a case for soft skills being much more than a useful tool in the Project Manager's toolkit. They help PMs learn their trade and support the learning necessary to survive in the project environment. My concluding note would encourage those involved in developing project managers (themselves or others) to acknowledge the primary importance of learning how to learn. Reflection is a fundamental component of experiential learning. Soft skills allow for PMs to perceive their experiences with greater insight and appreciation of what really matters to them. This research does not aim to pin down the most important skills for this. Any individual will be as different from the next in the same way any course which claims to develop a needed skill would be from another. Such issues lie beyond this discussion. This research offers empirical support for the development of skills that allow project managers to learn independently, potentially adapt more quickly and hopefully perform to higher levels.

Researching this subject involved taking a glance at the wealth of information available from an incredibly broad source of theories, each with their own assumptions and assertions. It is important to stress that focusing on soft skills should not be considered as a quick fix and that the other factors, underlying these suggestions, would be of potentially more use if the commitment was made to improve these too. Limitations of time have meant that this research was only able to remain at the surface of most of the issues, exploring only a few key parts in greater depth. My fascination for this subject has only been fuelled by the research and as expected I raised more questions than I was able to provide an answer to. Some of the interesting conclusions have been squeezed into this short summary but there is much more to be discussed and debated which I have chosen to simply hint at here (I struggled to reflect all of the findings in the space offered by my full dissertation!). I would welcome any comments on this work and would gratefully receive any questions, suggestions, information or opportunities from which I can learn more.

Stuart Murray

me@stuartjmurray.com

Acknowledgements

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The insights I gained from the interviews have been tremendously valuable, not only here, but also for me personally as I took a little piece of knowledge from each of the participants who kindly set aside some time and showed an interest. I'd particularly like to mention Ron Rosenhead of Project Agency who extended the reach of my survey to obtain some fantastic results. Thank you to everyone who took the time to fill out the survey, I was overwhelmed by the response and the thought put in by you. And finally, a special mention to the Australian Institute of Project Management who kindly supported my research.

Access to Results Online

The results have been made available below at the following addresses and can be accessed by following the links attached. All personal details have been removed from the online version of the survey.

Online results can be found at:

Version 1 – 34 responses to first version of questionnaire containing 3 extended questions

http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=EaYByu46hen7o665flhOEI7o7UJ2C1TVX843g5qsHUUs_3d

Version 2 – 166 responses to extended questions plus 2 rating questions

http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=TIJ7EbSh1GLs5xOeSyFxLdmPRjqfFHpQRsePDErDNus_3d

This report can also be found online at <http://www.teanimation.co.uk/our-thinking.php> under 'Research'. Please feel free to forward and share this report.

Results Summary

Sample Statistics					
No. of Responses: 166 Male: 69.4% Female: 30.6%					
(Results shown as %)	less than 2 years	2-5 years	5-10 years	10-20 years	over 20 years
How long have you been in your current role?	26.1	35.2	21.8	10.3	6.7
How long have you worked on projects?	4.3	17.9	33.3	27.8	16.7
How long have you been in paid employment?	1.9	6.2	16.1	27.3	48.4

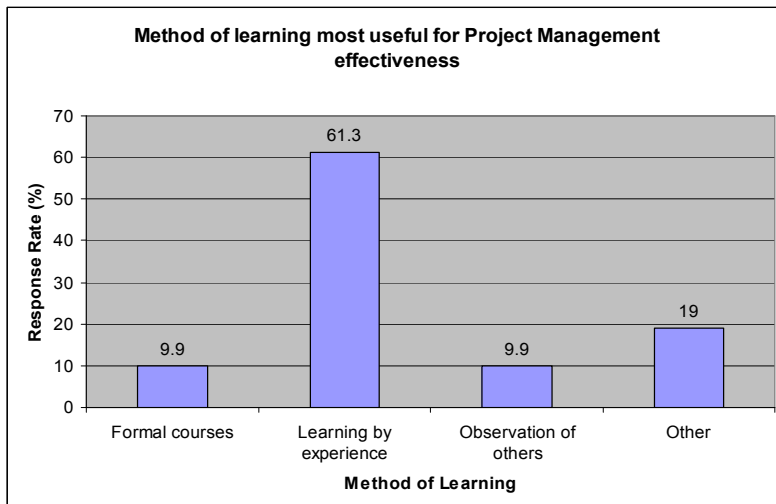
1. How key are 'soft skills' to a project manager's success?

Extremely	53.1%
Very	29.3%
Not important	4.8%

2. Can they be learned?

Yes	44.3%
To some extent	23.5%
Depends on person	30.2%

3. What method of learning has proved the most useful to your project management effectiveness?



4. To what degree is self-awareness and reflection important to your development as a project manager?

Critical	56.3%
Important	38.0%
Desirable	4.9%
Not relevant	0.7%

5. How has understanding yourself helped you learn from your experiences? (Figures are actual number of responses – percentages not appropriate)

Able to assess strengths and weaknesses	45
Highlights ways of improving performance	43
Can understand the effects of your behaviours on others	19
Able to understand the ability and behaviours of others more	19
Able to predict how you are likely to react in future situations	11
Able to identify problems or difficulties quickly	11
Provides confidence in yourself	10
Being critical maintains an accurate self perception	9

Other findings

