

EMBEDDING A PROJECT APPROACH

Even consultancies can learn from the discipline of project management. **Donnie MacNicol** and **Martin O'Neill** explain how they developed a professional project approach at Watson Wyatt to boost performance.

PROFESSIONAL services companies have traditionally relied on the technical competence of their consultants to deliver value to their customers through assignments, engagements and commissions. But the past few years has seen ever increasing pressure on these companies caused by the need to: be competitive, utilise scarce top consultant resources wisely, communicate effectively with customers and stakeholders across the larger work assignments now being undertaken, and defend themselves in an increasingly litigious environment.

Recognising that adoption of the 'right kind' of project management could meet these needs, Martin O'Neill, leader of learning and development at Watson Wyatt, Europe, invited Donnie MacNicol of Team Animation to work with him. The aim was to create and implement a project management development programme that would enhance the firm's consultancy success.

Unwilling to stick to 'the usual suite of training' they explored how they would:

- develop a contextualised and pragmatic project management framework suited to this industry,
- work in partnership with the internal project management department to add both technical depth and breadth,
- create inspiring learning that would encourage consultants to take advantage of the benefits of this new project management approach,
- reduce risks through planning and control,
- and apply learning methods not typically applied in this kind of organisation, such as e-learning.

Watson Wyatt advises many of the world's leading companies on people and financial issues. With 7,000 associates in 32 countries, it had much to consider before embarking on this course of action. So three years ago, O'Neill and MacNicol pulled the case for the investment together.

Through independent customer satisfaction benchmarking work carried out across their sector, it soon became clear that, while customers valued the technical skills of the consultants, the perception of Watson Wyatt and their peers was that they needed to improve their project management. In particular, focus was needed on cost estimating, customer communication and relationship management. It was also identified that customer expectations of how projects are delivered are rising as they increasingly adopt project management across their own businesses.

Also, project management must be structured and presented as a beneficial enhancement to the existing way of working, not something else to do as project management can be branded, wrongly, as bureaucratic.

CUTTING EDGE: Martin O'Neill recognises that the right kind of project management could meet many needs.



The benchmarking also concluded that project management must focus on the core business metric of profitability (it was therefore able to be seen by the associates as 'a good thing to do'), and that terminology is consistent with what is already valued and does not pose an added hurdle.

Historically, the role of the project manager has not been defined in professional services companies. The role has been split between the lead consultants and account managers or their equivalents. One reason for this is that few projects can justify a dedicated project manager.

During the first year, a simplified and contextualised project management framework including a four-staged life cycle was developed to include: definition, planning, execution and review. Processes were also developed, equipping the organisation to deliver even more consistently. This has now been adopted globally with an update on the internal knowledge management site so project management is now easy to access.

The approach has focused on a number of key principles, namely: clarifying customer objectives including assumptions etc; developing a comprehensive scope as a basis for all cost, time and resource planning; involving the team as much as possible in the planning; and carrying out reviews to learn from previous projects.

These are underpinned by the beliefs that: only things that remain to be done can be managed, anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and, in projects, nothing happens unless it is made to happen.



Historically, the role of the project manager has not been defined in professional services companies.



To realise the full value of the investment, there are a number of functions that must be aligned to project management. Customer and account management helps make effective project management a foundation for successful customer relations, while financial management links to the company's systems and reporting structures to enhance both.

There is also assignment management to ensure associates' work on projects makes best use of their capability and provides personal development opportunities. Commercial management is needed to ensure that cost estimates are structured and presented to the customer in an appropriate manner. Finally, quality management, carried out through an internal program called WorkExcellence at Watson Wyatt, focuses on doing the right things and doing them efficiently.

Project management can also provide considerable value when looking to improve repetitive or commoditised work. If a sound scoping exercise is carried out, which is then improved on through regular reviews, then a robust, easily contextualised plan can be created, together with an effective way of working.

A range of learning interventions have been developed also at Watson Wyatt, fully bespoke to the company's needs. The overall objective is always to encourage a desire in associates to want to engage with the thinking, because it adds real value to how they conduct the customers' projects.

E-learning is a more recent innovation, with

The PRINCE2 Cityscape logo™ is a Trade Mark of the Office of Government Commerce in the United Kingdom and other countries
PRINCE2™ is a Trade Mark of the Office of Government Commerce

THE Projects GROUP

Joined up thinking

PRINCE2™
integrated training
online, classroom, CD, intranet or blended

TPG academy  www.tpgacademy.com
Tel: 020 8722 8389



THE Projects GROUP

Joined up thinking

APMP
integrated training
credits given for further qualifications

TPG academy  www.tpgacademy.com
Tel: 020 8722 8389



modules designed specifically to replicate real life scenarios. They provoke thought and challenge the participants' understanding of their responsibilities and judgements in typical situations. Here, the modules are specifically designed to highlight Watson Wyatt's general project management framework and principles. Aware of the time pressures on all participants, all of the modules are designed in bite-sized chunks, and at the end there is a toolkit of guidelines, checklists and refresher tutorials for guidance, ease of access and reference.

Relationship and behaviours are as important to the successful delivery of projects as the more technical project management skills, and development programmes have proved to be an effective approach in the two programmes that have been running for the last two years.

Firstly, *Working for Profitability*, provides an in-depth classroom development workshop with a focus on the individual and how they can influence project success and therefore profitability. Secondly, *Managing for Profitability* is an intensive workshop for teams to work on improving their effectiveness in the context of project delivery.

Both programmes use a case study derived from several real projects. This enables all involved to learn about project management and immediately apply it in their real world. The "not invented here" syndrome has been successfully dealt with through this approach. Watson Wyatt employs highly talented and educated consultants. In this kind of culture where intellect is highly valued,



Customer expectations of how projects are delivered are rising as they increasingly adopt project management across their own business.



discussion and consensus is also seen as key, thus the programmes are highly interactive.

Future plans include developing a programme that will focus on challenging senior managers to create the climate, culture and environment that will maximise project success. This programme would also introduce the concept of programme management.

But solving real problems can also be an excellent way of demonstrating the value of project management thinking. Watson Wyatt and Team Animation now run bespoke workshops across Europe, based around materials from the above programmes. The objective is to take a team with an issue, problem or transition they are facing, and work through it, using project management as the basis of the discussion. This enables both content and process to be addressed, and has proven to be a powerful catalyst for change.

This programme started out as a response to changes in the marketplace. Given the challenging environment now faced by professional services companies, can they be effective without embracing these concepts?

- Donnie MacNicol is director of Team Animation, a consultancy for project managers, and chair of the People Specific Interest Group and member of the Policy Unit. Martin O'Neill is head of learning and development for Europe at Watson Wyatt and member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

THE Projects GROUP

Joined up thinking

MSP™
integrated training
continuing support for lifelong learning

TPG academy www.tpgacademy.com
Tel: 020 8722 8389

THE Projects GROUP

Joined up thinking

PPM DIPLOMA
integrated training
exemptions for previous study

TPG academy www.tpgacademy.com
Tel: 020 8722 8389

challenge management institute

MSP™ is a Trade Mark of the Office of Government Commerce
The Swirl logo™ is a Trade Mark of the Office of Government Commerce