

Project Management: Capability or Expertise?

I like to think that I'm a pretty capable sort of person.

I'm capable of driving a car, of playing the guitar, of running a semi-decent distance. I can even do the weekly food shopping (as long as I'm given the list, of course). I can deliver change projects.

But before I get too carried away, I'm fully aware that Lewis Hamilton has nothing to fear, despite my car-driving capabilities. Likewise, the million-selling album is quite a way off, and my running capabilities are unlikely to cause Mo Farah to change his training regime. And my wife is way, way better at shopping than I am. (At least when measured by quantity).

I'm capable of many things, but I recognise that I'm no skilled expert at most of them. Where I would claim expertise tends to be in capabilities that I have practised repeatedly, have learned (often through trial and error, also known as "making mistakes") and have gradually improved a basic capability into a real skill. And I'd imagine that most of us would say the same about ourselves.

If we're all agreed, what's the point of this note, apart from proving that I'm also capable of writing?

It's been prompted by me having recently read a number of CVs and profiles. These are CVs of people with very definite expertise and demonstrable track records in very real and valuable business disciplines – perhaps managing large complex IT-functions for FTSE100s, or running multi-national manufacturing plants, or developing significant new products in big pharmas. It's real, tangible, heavyweight, differentiated (quite possibly to the point of uniqueness) expertise.

These are not people who include "passed my driving test" on their list of achievements or skills.

But many of them do list "project management" on their CVs.

Undoubtedly these people will have been involved in projects. Can anyone *not* have been involved in change projects, if they've been in any management role over the last 10 years? But that's involvement, it's awareness, it's perhaps an understanding of basic principles. It's not expertise.

Which leads me to two questions.

Firstly, why do those deeply-experienced, respected, experts in professional disciplines add project management to their long list of skills? And **secondly**, is project management a widespread capability, that becomes as easy, widespread and habitual as driving, or is it a real professional skill?

Q1: Why is everyone now a project manager?

It's certainly a very useful, valuable and in-demand skill. There's no shortage of change activity, and so no lack of demand for good (ie demonstrably successful) change/project managers. But surely those C-level experienced professionals whose CVs I've been reading would have little interest in a humble project management role. Is it included to reassure potential employers or clients that they've been involved in project activity in previous roles. But – as said above – haven't we all?

Project Management; Capability or Expertise?

So perhaps it's because project management is still perceived as being a sufficiently new capability that it's also perceived as being a useful value-add for a CV. Or is it because there isn't a sufficiently widespread realisation that project management is actually a skilled discipline?

Q2: Is project management a general capability, or is it a carefully developed skill?

I'll make some assumptions here. Most of us can drive, and most of us are above-averagely skilled drivers. But few of us would trouble Lewis Hamilton around Monaco. Becoming a project manager is a lot easier than becoming a driver. Of course, there are some project management tests to gain the qualifications. But those are easier to pass than a driving test for anyone with an ability to learn some basic concepts and to apply them (theoretically) in a carefully controlled, safe environment.

The qualification demonstrates some level of capability (at least in theory), but not practical competence or real, in-depth, skill.

Project management is an art, not a science. It relies on unquantifiable and unpredictable interactions. It depends on instinct and intuition. Competence comes with experience (and bruises).

Capable might put you in Lewis' passenger seat (yes, I know). Competent puts you on the grid.

And here's a third, bonus, question ...

Q3: Should anyone care whether it's a capability or an expertise?

I might be slightly biased here ... but I'd suggest that we should all care. A lot.

Real projects (as distinct from small changes) are typically not easy things to deliver successfully. A lot of projects fail and far fewer succeed. There are a lot of capable project managers out there and far fewer expert ones. Coincidence, or cause and effect? Good project managers are not cheap resources and you need to know what you're getting for your money. (Note; although expensive doesn't automatically equate to good, cheap generally does mean not-good!).

What's the difference between the capable and the expert project manager? Fundamentally, it's about the ability to deliver the project within the agreed constraints. And to do so repeatedly and reliably, in a variety of different environments, dealing with all the unexpected challenges whilst retaining some sanity.

If you want – need – a real expert, look carefully at the track record. An expert project manager will have developed that expertise by successfully delivering a range of projects over a number of years. They're unlikely to have had the time to do that whilst developing other specialist discipline skills.

Contact the author



In partnership with



tonyvince@deliveryconsulting.com

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