Minding the Gap: Closing the Generation Divide in Project Management

Around the world, generations are colliding—with mixed results for projects.

Armed with years of experience, older workers have a store of lessons learned to draw upon. But those project professionals over 50 are now joined by a younger cohort that often comes in with a different approach to project management and work life in general. Steeped in the culture of social media, constant communication and cutting-edge tech tools, these younger project professionals bring a fresh perspective to the workplace.

Smart organizations recognize the value of both new and experienced project professionals. But they must also be prepared to handle the intergenerational clashes that may arise as the new guard puts its own stamp on the project management process.

Conflict among younger and older workers exists in almost three-quarters of organizations, according to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management.[i] Managers reported frustration with younger workers' poor work ethic, informality and lack of respect for authority, while younger workers complained of older generations' resistance to change, lack of recognition and tendency to micromanage.

To help bridge the gap, organizations must foster vigorous collaboration that not only capitalizes on the strengths of each group, but also allows them to share lessons learned. Pairing a Program Management Professional (PgMP)® certification holder with someone new to the profession can benefit both people. The veteran is exposed to a different perspective, while the "newbie" gains access to decades of experience.

Organizations should also establish standards, processes tools to help project professionals of all ages work together to consistently deliver project results.

Not addressing intergenerational issues as part of the early project planning and team-building processes can hurt productivity, says Philip Diab, PMP, PMI Past Chair, CEO of Leadership Formation, a management consultancy in Amman, Jordan.

"There have to be ground rules that the whole project team agrees to or challenges will arise," he says.

To head off potential conflicts among team members who may be accustomed to different methods and styles, he recommends project leaders:

- Create forums for project planning and problem-solving
- Create reporting processes
- Establish formal communications structures

"Without these standards, some people are sending email while others are talking face-to-face, and you lose the benefits of standardization," Mr. Diab says. "Standards reduce confusion and conflict."

Companies tempted to ignore the demographic realities do so at their own peril. There is simply no way around the repercussions the business world faces as workers in the developed world age and a younger workforce steps into leadership roles in emerging markets. In India, the median age is 26; in Brazil it is 29; and in South Africa it is 25, according to the *World Factbook*.[ii] Compare that to the United Kingdom, where the median age is 40, and Japan, where it is 45.

And as organizations continue to rely on global teams, that means more interaction across generations. To be effective, though, companies must find a way to truly leverage each group's skill set.

"**If you can harness the breadth of experience of the more seasoned workers with the new outlook of younger people then the project will go in the right direction**," says Craig Connell, vice president and director of the project management office (PMO) at engineering firm Black & Veatch, Overland Park, Kansas, USA.

Conversely, those companies that ignore the differences between generations risk poor communication and in-fighting that can ultimately drive project portfolios off track.

While older team members are more accustomed to a command structure, for example, younger workers will often disengage if they feel like their suggestions are not being taken seriously, says Stephen Granade, senior scientist and director of projects at Advanced Optical Systems (AOS), an aerospace research and development company in Huntsville, Alabama, USA.

"The trick is to treat the idea in the spirit of making the project better and not to frame the response as a challenge," he says. "If you keep it focused on the work, younger team members won't feel resentful and they won't shut down."

To ease the conflict among multigenerational teams, Mr. Granade suggests leading by example. "If you treat people with respect, others will too," he says.

To make the most of multigenerational teams, executives must:
- Create a workplace culture that recognizes how each generation is motivated and accommodate these needs through strong project management career paths, training and targeted project opportunities
- Acknowledge that younger workers may have different expectations when it comes to work-life balance and allow for flexibility
- Provide guidance and mentoring to younger project managers who may need support from key executives to gain acceptance from older workers and effectively lead project teams

A Brave New Workforce

As the next generation moves into more senior roles and veteran leaders retire, younger project managers will have a growing influence on project management processes and styles. That generational shift will change everything from the technology used to track and assess progress to the way project leaders communicate, operate and assign tasks. For organizations to make the most of the transition, they must first understand what motivates each generation, then adjust their processes and culture to accommodate them.

"Scope, schedule, budget and quality are still at the foundation of the project management process," says Mr. Connell.

Yet younger project leaders cannot survive by process alone.

"Communication strategies, leadership and the ability to foster trust across the team are key skills for the next generation of leaders, and those are harder to teach," he says.

Here, too, the younger generation may follow a different path, adopting a more casual and personal approach. They are more likely to work alongside project managers and their teams to understand their issues and challenges, for example, rather than relying solely on data analysis to make decisions.

Instead of trying to replace this behavior, companies should help leaders hone their project management style and processes in way that brings out the best in team members of any age.

To groom its next generation of project management talent, Black & Veatch developed a global future leaders program. The company identifies young employees with leadership potential and creates a career path to sharpen those skills.

Creating opportunities for new experiences also helps organizations retain their best young project leaders, says Mr. Diab.

"The new generation of professionals has a completely different mindset than individuals in their 50s and 60s," he says. "They feel the opportunities in the world are endless, and because of that they are motivated by a

different set of rewards and recognition."

Unlike older workers who expected to put in long hours and work their way slowly up the corporate ladder, the new generation actively seeks out new opportunities and challenges. That does not mean younger workers have a different perception of the value of project management, however. They still seek to be a part of a satisfying workplace environment that delivers value to customers and to employees. "It is not about instant gratification," Mr. Diab says. "It is about them wanting to make a contribution."

And they want to make that contribution in a collaborative workplace. More than half said they prefer to "be part of a team that makes decisions on a consensus basis," according to a report by market research firm Intrepid and social marketing agency Mr Youth.[iii]

Younger project professionals also view career advancement as their responsibility, rather than something a company provides. As a result, they are willing to jump from role to role—or company to company—if it means they can improve their skill set or job satisfaction.

Although 61 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds said they believe there are career opportunities for them, many believe these lie with another employer or in another country, according to a GfK Custom Research study of more than 30,000 workers around the world.[iv] Fifty-eight percent of young workers said they were actively searching for a job or would be looking in the

next six months, and 41 percent were willing to emigrate to find new employment.

That fluidity could spell trouble for organizations looking to groom a new set of project management leaders. Just 21 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds were "highly engaged" with their employer, compared to 31 percent of those in their 60s.

To keep their rising stars, organizations must create a clear project management career path and back it up with training and mentoring, says Mr. Diab. Executives who dismiss younger workers' ambitions as merely the frivolity of youth risk stifling an enthusiastic and willing group of workers.

Organizations must also recognize a polarization of work-life balance issues between younger and older workers. Nearly 40 percent of younger employees said they believe their employer is using difficult economic times to justify asking them to do more, compared to one in four older workers (24 percent).[v] Forty percent of younger workers are also frequently stressed at work—a higher percentage than that seen in any other age group.

> ### The Project:
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> **The Company:** Black & Veatch, Overland Park, Kansas, USA
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> **The Sector:** Engineering and construction
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> **The Lesson:** Backed by a supportive predecessor, a positive mentor and strong organizational career path, a young project leader steps up.

Black & Veatch is not afraid of putting young leaders in charge of major projects. The global engineering firm actively seeks out rising stars and then backs them up with a formal program aimed at providing the training, mentoring and opportunities they need to expand their skills and knowledge.

"It is all about sustainability of the business," says Craig Connell, vice president and director of Black & Veatch's project management office (PMO). "**They are the pipeline of our future project managers. The more experience we give them today, the more value they bring to our company**."

Brad Warn is one of the company's next generation of leaders. The 42-year-old associate vice president and project manager is currently running a US$24 billion, 10-plus year project to build a power plant outside of Johannesburg, South Africa. He joined the Kusile project in 2008 as the assistant project manager to a leader more than 25 years his senior who was getting ready to retire. Within eight months, Mr. Warn had moved into the top leadership position.

His predecessor stayed on the job for a year to help with the transition, but that "made it hard to get people to see me in that role," Mr. Warn says. To better position Mr. Warn, the retiring project leader removed himself from the project spotlight. Mr. Warn meanwhile made a conscious effort to demonstrate leadership by heading project meetings, participating in key decisions, and visiting the project site to provide support and get to know his team.

Mr. Warn's face-to-face interaction marked a new approach. Whereas his predecessor had a hierarchical style, working from his office and relying on his direct reports to bring him information from the front lines of the project, Mr. Warn prefers to gather first-hand information on the project's status and team vibe.

Younger team members responded well to the face-to-face interaction with their new leader, but older workers were a bit taken aback. "It is not something they were used to," Mr. Warn admits.

He worked hard to alleviate the concerns of older team members who seemed to prefer working through the organizational structure to communicate, reassuring them that face-to-face meetings were not simply a form of micromanagement.

Mr. Warn relies on a mentor within the organization 20 years his senior to help him make the best decision for the project, and says the relationship has helped him when working with more experienced team members. "I am in a senior role in a foreign country, so there are not a lot of people I can turn to for help," he says. "Being able to talk to my mentor gives me the confidence that the choices I am making are sound."

Such mentoring relationships boost Black & Veatch's efforts to groom future project management superstars. "**Connecting up-and-comers with seasoned executives nurtures our next generation of leaders**," says Mr. Connell.

By encouraging collaboration across generations through mentoring and training, Black & Veatch ensures its best practices—the processes that the old guard used to succeed—are passed on to the new breed. **The next generation may adapt what they learn to suit their own style, but the foundation will remain across all the company's project teams.** "Making that knowledge accessible ensures project managers can tap into the experiences of the entire organization," says Mr. Connell.

Best of Both Worlds

There is no questioning the value a seasoned veteran can bring to a company. Yet problems often arise when organizations put ambitious, self-motivated 20-somethings on a team with 50- and 60-year-olds who have spent years working under the assumption that older team members have greater authority. "Together, they can struggle to communicate and resist each other's approach," Mr. Diab says.

Just four percent of younger workers in Australia and New Zealand wanted to work with older team members, according to a survey by Leadership Management Australasia.[vi] It is not just younger people who take issue with their most seasoned co-workers, either. Only 17 percent of older workers want to work with people their own age, while 40 percent want to work with members of Generation X (those born in the mid-1960s to early 1980s).[vii]

AOS' Mr. Granade deals with team members ranging from recent college graduates to senior engineers with more than 30 years to experience—each group offering its own skills. "The new crop of engineers come with the latest cutting-edge education, but the graybeards have years of banked experience," he says.

Working together helps the team move past the biases each group brings to the project. Older workers often have a knee-jerk reaction of "we tried that before and it did not work," he says, whereas younger workers are eager to try new ideas, but have little context in which to frame their approach.

To help foster collaboration across generations, AOS encourages project teams to begin with a kick-off meeting to bring team members together and build trust. The company expects project managers to be open to issues from anyone on the team—regardless of their seniority.

He points to a current AOS project to develop remote sensors that help helicopters locate and pick up loads on the ground. Some of his young "hot-shot" engineers came up with several ideas for the sensor gleaned from their work with open source software. Mr. Granade balanced their innovative concepts by partnering them with more seasoned team members, who were able to look at the code and identify possible problem areas. "**That combined set of experience was really helpful**," he says. "**Everyone was on the same page, and**

they all brought value to the project."

Organizations must take the same collaborative approach to project communication practices. Weaned on high-tech tools, younger workers tend to push for greater integration of texting, tweeting, posting and instant messaging—and not necessarily in the office or during the traditional 9-to-5 workday. In many cases, younger workers are the early adopters, driving demand for internal collaboration tools. Australian communications firm Optus reported that 40 percent of younger workers wanted their employers to enable internal social media platforms.[viii]

Communicating on the go, working remotely and updating project documents in real time can add efficiencies to a project and value to the bottom line.

Companies cannot simply eliminate established communication styles that experienced team members are familiar with, however, warns Mr. Granade. "Face-to-face communication builds trust on a team," he says. AOS, for example, relies on weekly 10-minute stand-up meetings to keep teams connected, while embracing technology-based communication tools for daily communiqués.

Organizational executives can help project leaders embrace new communications tools by defining guidelines for project management structure, while still allowing flexibility in the way it is delivered. That may mean changing requirements or standards for project reporting and adjusting the frequency of

progress meetings. For example, older employees or those with family obligations may need to limit working late hours, whereas a 20-something might be perfectly happy to work all night and come in late the next day.

The Project:

The Company: Vanderlande Industries, Veghel, Netherlands

The Sector: Baggage handling equipment and technology

The Lesson: Organizations must acknowledge that project professionals of different ages are looking for different responsibilities.

Edwin Bolwerk has learned that to truly optimize his project team, he has to know what motivates them—on the job and in their personal lives. He has also discovered that **what motivates a 24-year-old does not always work for a 55-year-old**.

A senior manager at Vanderlande Industries, Mr. Bolwerk is currently overseeing a project to install baggage-handling technology across multiple terminals at the Amsterdam Airport Schiphol in Amsterdam, Netherlands. He has a team of engineers ranging in age from their early twenties to their mid-50s, and he considers their ages, their personal circumstances and their personal goals when he assigns tasks.

"The 20-year-olds come to the project with their eyes wide and full of excitement," he says. He taps into that—along with their high energy and flexibility—to oversee tests that must be

completed during the four hours the airport is closed overnight. "The young guys will work in shifts for a longer period if it means they can take on greater responsibilities," he says.

Backed with training from more experienced workers, younger team members can put some of those new lessons into action on the night shift. Because there are fewer workers, younger team members perform more complex tasks, such as being in charge of testing for new software implementations. "It is an opportunity for them to grow their skill set and learn more at a much faster rate," Mr. Bolwerk explains.

The team's older workers, who are likely to more family commitments, are less willing to take those night shifts—and Mr. Bolwerk is fine with that. "It is strenuous work and it puts a lot of pressure on them," he says.

Mr. Bolwerk is quick to point out that he does not keep older team members off the night shift just because he is a nice guy. He does it to protect his project, his team and his company's core knowledge base.

"After the age of 40, difficult working conditions like night shifts will cause one to quit," he says. And he is not about to risk losing some of his organization's most experienced team members. "Keeping them off the night shift demonstrates that I value them, and they see it as an added benefit of the job."

Building that kind of adaptability into project team structures

preserves and nurtures valuable talent.

Emerging Leaders

In established markets, organizations may turn to the next generation to save money or spur innovation. In many emerging markets, though, companies have no choice but to put their youngest employees into advanced project management roles; there simply are no seasoned veterans available to take the jobs. In Mr. Diab's home base of Jordan, for example, 70 percent of the workforce is under 30.[ix]

"**Younger people are being expected to step up and take responsibility**," he says. They also have higher expectations for rapidly moving into leadership positions, which can create complications in global organizations accustomed to a more traditional career-development path. "In the United States it may take 20 years to get into a senior position, but in Jordan it might take one or two," Mr. Diab says.

The booming young workforce in emerging markets can have serious implications for global companies expanding their project presence in these regions, says Mr. Connell of Black & Veatch.

"Asia and the Middle East are huge growth areas for us, and the workforce there is much younger," he says. Black & Veatch would prefer to source leaders locally, rather than paying for the expense and disruption of bringing in expatriates from their home office. However, projects developed in those regions will be staffed with younger team members, and those workers expect rapid advancement.

To make up for their relative inexperience and to reduce the risks of putting young workers in critical leadership roles, Black & Veatch offers formal project management training and mentoring to promising employees in emerging markets. "**If we can grow our project management capacity overseas, it gives us an advantage over other companies**," Mr. Connell says.

Conclusion

As younger project professionals meet up with seasoned veterans, organizations are looking for ways to make the most of their multigenerational teams. Those companies that create a corporate culture that fosters collaboration across generations through project management standards and processes will gain a competitive edge.

It is often a fine line. Organizations must engage the next generation of project management leaders. Yet catering too much to younger project professionals can alienate valuable, experienced workers.

Only by acknowledging the differences—and similarities—of each generation of project professionals can organizations seamlessly move forward, adapting to a changing world without losing their foundation.

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[i] *Intergenerational Conflict in the Workplace,* Society for Human Resource Management, April 2011. Results based on survey of 400 human resources professionals.

[ii] *The World Factbook*, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

[iii] *Millennial Inc.: What your company will look like when Millennials call the shots*, Mr. Youth Intrepid. Results based on an April 2010 survey of 812 U.S. and U.K. respondents.

[iv] *GfK International Employee Engagement Survey.* Results based on interviews with 30,556 working adults in 29 countries interviewed between 8 February and 4 April 2011.

[v] Ibid

[vi] *Leadership, Employment and Direction Survey,* Leadership Management Australasia. Results based on interviews with 774 professionals.

[vii] Ibid

[viii] Optus, June 2011

[ix] http://www.jordaninvestment.com/JordanataGlance/PeopleTalent/tabid/76/language/en-US/Default.aspx