# Importance of Soft Skills in Project Management

### Dr. Anupama Jena, Swasti Suvasweta Satpathy

Asst.Professor, Asian school of Business Management, Bhubaneswar,Odisha.

**Abstract:** Project management is one of the areas of business management, where a project manager has the sole responsibility to manage the project effectively. So, project manager needs a number of skills to handle the project. Though before becoming a project manager he acquires all the formal educations and gathers experiences, he needs managerial skills which can be otherwise said as soft skills. It refers to some non-technical skills such as leadership, communication, coordination, decision making, negotiation, etc. Although these are not directly related to the outcome of the project, they have a lot of importance in all the phases of a project. Hard skills or technical skills like creating work break down structure, preparing schedule plan, preparing budget plan, etc. are very important but the output of such plans cannot be incorporated without the above mentioned soft skills.

**Introduction:** Soft skill reflects a person's relationship with other people through his character traits and interpersonal skills. It focuses more on who people are, rather than what they know. It makes the work environment too flexible and easier to manage through subtle behaviors and communication. It includes attributes like adaptability and flexibility, and it also includes problem solving, creative thinking, conflict resolution, time management and self-motivation. This word is being used by the employers to refer intangible and non-technical abilities that are being found out from the candidates. Sometimes people refer soft skills as transferable skills or professional skills, which is very less specialized but more aligned with the general disposition and candidate's personality.

Since soft skills are more personality driven, it relates to our attitudes and intuitions, and is less inclined to our qualifications. It is very vital to consider what our soft skills are and before applying for a job, how we can find evidence for it. This is very true as far as graduate programmers are considered, and one of the bright examples of it is the project manager, for whom transferable skills and potencies are given priority over professional experience. And demonstration of soft skills is equal to demonstrating of potency to progress in the career of our choice.

## 1. Why do Soft Skills matter?

A soft skill differentiates between the adequate and the ideal candidates. As far as competitive job markets are concerned, recruiters look for the people who are efficient to become leaders and leadership quality depends on the soft skills. So, in this case, technical ability and knowledge in the domain area is not important. It is the interpersonal people skills, social skills, communication skills, attitudes, social intelligence and emotional intelligence quotients is what matters over here, because these skills help people to work and perform well in a suitable environment.

Soft Skills are not only important in the organizations for facing the clients, it is also very important for an employee to interact with his clients. That's why employees give a lot of importance to soft skills so that they can create a productive and healthy environment.

## 2. What are the Key Soft Skills?

Some of the pillars of soft skills are-

I. Communication: Communication in soft skills doesn't focus on the syllables or speeches, rather it gives importance to the tone and style in which the communicators speak to their audience, analyze the issues and challenges with the colleagues and clients alike. It also plays a vital role as far as leadership quality is concerned, since leaders are expected to handle clearly and comprehensibly.

II. Self- motivation: An employee is expected to take initiative and work positively for his organization round the clock, which is a vital soft skill for an employee. This quality not only exhibits reliability and commitment, it also shows that without the need of or constant oversight you can easily fit efficiently into an organizational structure.

III. Leadership: It is an important pillar of soft skill which reflects if we are not directly managing others. Leadership achieves its importance when some other skills like positive attitude and outlook, the ability to communicate effectively and an aptitude for both self-motivating as well as motivating others are taken into consideration. According to a recent article in the Harvard Business Review by emotional intelligence guru Daniel Goleman, the five abilities that distinguish the best leaders from the average ones are self-awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills etc.

India has changed a lot which can no more accept the 'lone-wolf' leadership styles, rather positive energy, team building, care, reward, teach, decide, create is what is given a lot of importance today.

IV. Self-awareness: It is one of the very important parts of soft skill which is highly neglected. It not only helps how to accept responsibilities for any mistakes, but also demonstrates willingness to learn and progress.

Daniel Goleman, the guru of emotional intelligence, identified that self-awareness in a triangular shape is made up of emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence. One cannot lead a happy and prosperous life without self-awareness.

V. Team work: It is like a basket ball team working together for a perfect shot, in which each member of the team is being assigned a specific role to play for completing the job successfully. Here, one of the players scored the basket, but it was made possible by every people's planning, cooperation and coordination. Employers look for those candidates who not only have the capability to work efficiently with others, but also understand that every player gets an opportunity of getting the ball. Team work includes skills and habits like:

a) Working cooperatively

b) Contributing to groups with ideas

c) Communication (Both giving and receiving)

d) Sense of responsibility

e) Healthy respect for different opinions, customs, and individual preferences.

f) Ability to participate in group decision-making

VI.     Ability to Work under Pressure and Time management: There are many jobs which demands not only deadlines, but also occasionally face high stakes. Recruiters give reward to those candidates who show decisive attitude, an unfaltering capacity to think clearly and deeply and the ability to compartmentalize and set stress aside. Time management is very much related to the ability to work under pressure, and also within the deadlines. Employers who are able to manage their timings and prioritise tasks are the real successful managers.

VII.     Flexibility:

You must always be able to predict what's next and have the flexibility to evolve."-----Marc Benioff.

Adaptability and flexibility are the two sides of the same coin, i.e, creativity.        Every day is a new day which brings some kinds of changes. It may be a small one (leaving a job and joining another) or a massive one (the birth of a child). The capacity of accepting the real fact and changing according to the situation is to be flexible. It is this soft skill which asks capacity and the willingness to acquire new skills and to face new tasks and challenges.

VIII.     Negotiation and Conflict Resolution: It is a friendly fight, which is wrapped in positive attitude. Every employee is expected to negotiate whether in salary or in ideas and thoughts. But the greatest problem that the society is facing today is that people are inefficient to learn how to negotiate well

Step-1: Determine your negotiation objective.

Step-2: Identify the issues for you and the other person/party.

Step-3: Think about strengths and weaknesses for the issue on both the sides

Step-4: Agree the attitude you will take into the negotiation.

Step-5: Decide on a strategy for each issue.

Step-6: Plan your bargaining position for each issue.

Step-7: What tactics will be used?

Step-8: Plan your questions and evidences.

Step-9: Decide your plan B.

## 3.  Essential Soft Skills for Project Managers:

a) The first essential skill that the project manager must have is exceptional communication skills: Communication gap is the most vital point that a project manager should keep in his/her mind because he has to communicate with a lot of people like his clients, team members, etc. And research says that in many cases, since the project managers are unable to interact properly while solving problems with stake holders, they have to lose projects. He is expected to have excellent knowledge in four of the skills, i.e., writing, reading, speaking and listening, so that he/she can deal smoothly with the project imperatives and the project objectives. A project manager is also expected to be efficient with some other necessities other than communication skills. Leadership quality is the next thing that he needs, so that they can have a team spirit and a bonding amongst themselves. It is found that in some of the MNC's, people managers have a different role to play other than a project manager, so that some of the responsibilities of the project manager can be handed over to the people manager. But a project manager takes the overall

responsibility for team work and team cohesion.

b) People Management and People Enabling: Conflict resolution, mentoring skills, negotiation, etc. are some of the important soft skills which is highly required by the project manager. Hence, the project manager will be capable for team development which must be exemplary. Apart from this, the project manager is being assigned to recruit the employees according to the need of the organisation.

c) Closing Thoughts: Interfacing skill is also another skill that has been briefly touched, without which a project manager cannot deal with customer interfacing because he is expected to handle customer complaints, which on the other hand needs to be prevented to achieve customer delight and customer vow that go beyond customer satisfaction.

## 4. What is a Project?

As per PMBOK, a project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service. Projects are undertaken to achieve strategic plans of organizations. There is always a certain start and end point of any kind of project. Each project is different from the other and that's why it's unique in nature. Few examples of project are-

a) Any change in organization structure
b) Designing a new vehicle
c) Developing new information system for a farm
d) Developing an inventory management software for a medicine store
e) Construction of a building or a plant

f) Implementation of any new procedure or process in organization

As a project is a group of activities, success of project depends on the ability of the project manager and the team members. Even if a project manager is very good at technicalities, interpersonal or soft skills are very important for project success. Only technical knowledge doesn't help project manager to complete the project successfully.

## 5. What a Project Manager Does?

The basic task of a project manager is to manage a project or a group of projects. Some projects are complex and some are not. The scope of each project is defined. Ex- If a company is planning to launch a new product, the scope is broad. But, if a company is designing a marketing plan for an existing product, the scope is not so broad. The primary task of a project manager is to plan and execute the project. He allocates resources to the project team. While allocating human resources, a project manager has to be very cautious. He should know the technical expertise of the people who are allocated to the project.

**Allocation of Resources to project Team:** As it is already mentioned that projects can be of any type, it is very important to understand how a project is executed with the help of its team members. It can be easily understood with the example of an IT project. Like every projects, a software project deals with different phases. It starts from planning phase and ends with deploying phase. These activities are carried out as per the requirement of the project. Software life cycle model helps project manager to know how the software project will be executed. General life cycle model of any software project is as follows:

**Phase 1:** Requirement analysis
**Phase 2:** Design

**Phase 3:** Implementation

**Phase 4:** Testing

A project manager gets a clear idea on the phases of a project and he plans accordingly. He knows who is fit for which kind of task and allocates resources as per the task.

## 6. Recommendation for Creating an Optimal Team:

A) Project manager should understand why resources need to be optimally allocated

B) Project manager should value heterogeneity among team members

C) Project manager should know who the appropriate person is, for a particular phase of software development life cycle.

D) Project manager has to be intuitive and judgmental as he needs to track the performance of the project to meet the deadline for the milestones. He has to make sure that the members are following the schedule.

E) The technology lead of a team has to be good at thinking and decision making. He needs to lead the developers in a team. He should be logical so as to guide the developers.

## 7. Academic Background:

A project management institute (Newton Squire, Pennsylvania, and USA) has created standards and practices for project managers. PMI institute's PMBOK (Project Management Body of Knowledge)is a set of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques generally accepted as best practices in project management. There are ten knowledge areas and five process groups as specified in PMBOK. The five processes are as follows:

a) Initiating

b) Planning

c) Executing

d) Monitoring and controlling

e) Closing

The ten knowledge areas are as follows:

a) Project integration management

b) Project scope management

c) Project time management

d) Project cost management

e) Project quality management

f) Human resource management

g) Communication management

h) Risk management

i) Procurement management

j) Project stake holder management

This PMBOK guide is referred in all universities providing project management education. PMBOK guide emphasises the balance between hard and soft skills. An individual who is into the field of project management has to be very good in his communication; else it will be very difficult to manage the five different phases of the project. All the phases need human resource and that's why proper communication, coordination among the team members is very essential. So, it is very important for a project manager to balance between concern for task and concern for people.

It is very clear from the PMBOK's knowledge areas and process groups, that there are a number of things which need to be managed in a project apart from the technicalities. While managing projects, there are chances of cost and schedule over-runs. One of the factors for these over-runs is team composition. These factors can affect the execution of project and hence affect the performance. So, here a project manager cannot overcome such problems with his technical knowledge as it is a human aspect of the project. A project manager has to be very

careful in selecting the team member as diversity in team plays a very important role.

## 8. Comparing Technical Skills and Soft Skills Required by a Project Manager:

List of Soft Skills Required:

a) Managing exceptions
b) Leading
c) Decision making
d) Influencing
e) Negotiating
f) Conflict resolution
g) Critical problem solving
h) Coordinating and communicating
i) Motivating

List of Technical Skills:

a) Scheduling tasks
b) Preparing work breakdown structures
c) Finding critical path for a project
d) Calculating earned values
e) Calculating budgets
f) Preparing risk mitigation plans
g) Variants analysis

There are few reasons for which sometimes project fails. In case of a failure we cannot say that it is due to the lack of technical knowledge of a project manager or the team, rather we have to task both soft and hard skills into consideration.

| Project Failure Reasons | Skill Responsible For Project Failure |
|---|---|
| Lack of experience and training of a project manager | Both soft skills and hard skills |
| Project manager fails to manage expectations | Both soft skills and hard skills |
| Lack of leadership in all five phases of project management | Soft skill |
| Project manager fails to identify document | Soft skills are more important |
| and track customer requirements | than hard skills |
| Improper plan | Hard skill |
| Incorrect effort estimation | Hard skill |
| Ethical and cultural mis-alignment | Soft skill |
| Mis-match in goals of project team and business organization it serves | Soft skill |
| Lack of communication, tracking and reporting | Soft skills are more important than hard skills |
| Improper methods | Both soft skills and hard skills |

If a project manager is not trained properly on both the skills there is a chance of project failure. A proper balance between the two skills is the key to success for a project manager. The importance of balance of both can be understood by taking a simple example from the reason of project failure, i.e. poor planning: suppose we have identified that the reason for poor planning is lack of domain knowledge and experience of a project manager. Here the above skills can be built up by the following ways:

a) Learning specific steps to identify work break down structure that reflects project scope.
b) Learning to allocate resources and making a proper plan of schedule for each work break down structure.
c) Learning to find out critical path of a project.

Apart from learning these technical skills, the project manager should also know how to implement the skills which require communicating the schedule and the resource allocation plan to his team members. Here soft skill is very important. Even if a project manager

has prepared a perfect work break down structure, it is not going to help if he is not going to communicate the entire plan to his team members. If a work break down structure is created for a project and i.e. to be performed by only project manager, then we can say preparing work break down structure is a hard skill. But, as there are members in a project team and each member is assigned to a set of different tasks, work break down structure needs to be communicated to the team members. Again, a work break down structure cannot be prepared if the specific business objective of a project is not known. To understand the business objective and scope of a project, a project manager has to talk to different stakeholders of a project. The different stake holders have their own assumptions and priorities and many of whom will introduce constraints. So, to manage these stakeholders and to understand the exact requirement of the project which satisfies the need of the stakeholders, negotiation, leadership and organization skills are highly required. With the help of these soft skills a project manager arrives at a mutually agreeable definition of the scope of the project.

Once scope of the project is known, a project manager can directly start the planning phase. In planning phase, project manager normally breaks down the work break down structures, finds out the dependencies among tasks and allocates the sub- tasks to the resources. A project manager needs to negotiate within and outside the organization for appropriate resources to make the best team. Project manager should apply problem solving skills to obtain a proper balance between scope, time, cost and quality. For all these a project manager needs strong leadership skill. Even if the scope of a project is defined and plan is made before starting a project, a project manager needs to respond to the changes and work as per the change requests made by the client. To handle these changes project manager needs soft skills. For a project manager responding to changes means he has to again plan the schedule for his resources as per the new changes. Preparing the schedule needs technical skill but it is almost impossible without having few soft skills, such as communication and co-ordination. Communication skill helps the project manager to inform the team members regarding the changes. It is normally said that a project manager spends approximately 85% of his time on communicating. Effective communication is the key to proper execution of the project. Project manager has to say the right thing at right time to his team members for which he needs to listen properly to the client. Here, project manager has to make sure all the time that communication is clear. He should learn to deliver information with proper body language and listen properly to get the requirements clearly. To inform the client regarding the status of the project the project manager should get the correct information from his team members by communicating and co-coordinating with them.

9. **Sources of Conflict in Project while Balancing the Soft Skills and Hard Skills:** A project manager cannot make everybody happy in conflict resolution process as he needs to look after the technical aspect of the project plan for the sake of resolving conflict, he cannot go for some temporary conflict resolution plans, rather he has to make a solid plan to handle the conflict. There are many ways to resolve conflict such as withdraw, smoothing, compromising, forcing and confronting. A project manager uses his soft skills and decides which method to use as per the situation and phase of the project.

10. **Conclusion:** If we will observe properly, we can understand that hard skills and soft skills

cross over each other in all the stages of project management. All the soft skills that a project manager needs are not one time endeavors but threads applied throughout the project. Since soft skills spread widely through personal and interpersonal attributes, it must be recognized from the simple gesture of day-to-day activities to the complex management activities at workplace. So, to fit the right soft skill at the proper place is the need of the hour.

Soft skills play a very vital role in the professional life of an individual and the basics of it starts from the foundation of ethics, integrity and values. It contains team work, communication skill and interpersonal skills as its main pillars. Leaders are always favored for taking initiatives and responsibilities, and so are the project managers. To have a proper coordination in the team, listening skills and communication skills helps the project manager to solve many problems. Time management is also one of the important factors for appreciating self-discipline of the team members. A project manager is expected to have strategic vision, self-confidence, courage, execution and drive for results as his core competencies. A project manager needs keen observation to make his team members multi-tasking.

Soft skills are considered as critical traits for one's career growth, and this is the reason why soft skills are said to expose somebody's inner self. So it is said that, *hard skills reflect what you know and soft skills indicate who you really are.*

## 11. References:

1. Goleman, D. (1997).Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ. New York: Bantam Books.
2. Goleman, D. (1998 b). What makes a Leader? Harvard Business Review.
3. James, D. (1999). Managing People in Organizations. Financial World Publishing.
4. Lussier, R.N. (1990). Human Relations in Organizations. Homewood, II: Irwin.
5. Mantel, S.J., Jr. and Meredith, J. R. (1986). IEs are Best Suited to Challenging Role of Project Manager, Industrial Engineering.
6. Sacco. R. (2006). Yogi Berra, PMP. Computerworld.
7. Sampson. B. (2007). Get with the Project. Professional Engineering.
8. Van Ingen, S. (2007). Leadership of Project Teams. Chemical Engineering.
9. Zielinski, D.(2005). Soft Skills, Hard Skills. Training.