

The art of Project Management

Although large-scale projects have taken place throughout history, only recently have project management methods been codified. While such methodologies primarily reflect the Western experience, **George Sifri** of ESI International says that his company can still drive change in competencies, behaviours and skills across Africa

Africa is an enormous continent, one that is home to widely varying business cultures and also vast reserves of natural resources. These are resources that have attracted multi-national oil and gas companies like BP and Shell to the continent in the drive to exploit such materials to their maximum. However, while some African countries lack the expertise and infrastructure necessary to derive the maximum economic benefits, others by contrast boast extremely advanced technical knowledge and facilities. This all combines to present a complex picture that project management companies must take full cognisance of if they are to deliver real business benefits for their clients in Africa. “When we talk about project management competencies and capabilities in Egypt, it is not the same story as it is in Sudan, Libya or Morocco,” acknowledges George Sifri, a Senior Instructor and Consultant at ESI International, the leading provider of project management training and consulting. “What we are trying to do is advance the profession of project management,” he continues. “We focus on ensuring that individuals or corporations have the skills and competencies necessary for project management, while we also try to promote the appropriate behaviours. So, from the human perspective we want to successfully implement project management as a core competency for achieving business goals and business objectives in Africa.”



This is an ambitious goal, one made only more complex by the fact that established project management methodologies have their roots in the western world. Indeed, while it can be argued that large-scale projects like the Egyptian pyramids or the Great Wall of China have been undertaken throughout history, only relatively recently have project management processes been codified, and in Sifri's view the resulting methodologies very much reflect the western experience. “The western world codified the process – they were the first to go ahead and codify things. Thus many of the general management and economic theories that have been developed are not actually applicable to a large number of African countries,” he says. “The African market tends to look at motivational theories in a different way to the Western market. This makes the process of going ahead and applying the core project management knowledge processes and tools in Africa a big challenge for us. This is a challenge we are determined to meet by providing

extensive training and taking the specific circumstances of each individual country fully into account.”

Encouraging and stimulating debate

However, fulfilling such objectives will demand more than mere training, at least in the traditional sense. While in developed countries it is widely recognised that the challenging of established processes and products is crucial to the development of innovative new solutions, this is an idea that has not taken such firm root in much of Africa. “When we talk about power-distance we are basically talking about organisational structures. In Africa employees at lower levels of the organisational structure often show an unwillingness to make any decision without consulting their superiors first,” explains Sifri, pointing towards a need for a fundamental shift in mindset. “This affects the stages of a typical project lifecycle – initiation, then design and finally execution and finishing

– in different ways. At the initiation stage power-distance can be extremely beneficial, as when the project is starting I need to go ahead and put a certain hierarchy in place. The project manager needs formal authority to go ahead, put the structure in place and define the rules and possibilities. But then when I look at design and execution, where eventually I need to have input from the engineers and technicians that are doing the work, this power-distance becomes a disadvantage.”

Such issues only add another layer of complexity for ESI International to negotiate when working in Africa. However, Sifri is keen to stress that


above mean that their work in Africa is focused more on the former than the latter. “Approximately 95-98 per cent of what we do at this point in Africa at this point in time is provide training,” says Sifri. “We mainly offer training to those big corporations that have moved to the area because of their oil and gas projects. After moving to the African continent those companies that are capable of investing in people to develop these competencies are often extremely keen to get involved. We also do customised courses for certain companies in order to make sure they are aware of what they have in terms of their own tools and processes.”

We are trying to advance the profession of project management. We focus on ensuring that individuals or corporations have the skills and competencies necessary, while we also try to promote the appropriate behaviours. So, from the human perspective we want to successfully implement project management as a core competency for achieving business goals and business objectives in Africa

his company’s approach to providing training is well capable of reflecting the specific needs and circumstances of the country in which they’re operating. “When we talk about training, it’s about more than training in the conventional sense. It involves a whole cultural shift – it’s about transferring knowledge, it’s about transferring behaviours that are appropriate for the nature of the projects and project management. When you think about project management you think about three pillars – people, processes and tools. People is where we have the problem. When it comes to people we basically talk about competencies and we talk about skills. However, we also talk about behaviour. Now, to a certain extent the most challenging aspect is actually the behaviours of people rather than their competencies.”

Changing behaviour is of course a difficult, long-term task, particularly when the fact that such behaviours are often deeply embedded in both the individual and collective psyche is taken into consideration. As such, while ESI International provides both training and consulting, the circumstances outlined

Maximising the benefits

The African continent is blessed with plentiful raw materials, materials which can play a large part in furthering economic development. However, the effective exploitation of these kinds of resources is a complex process, one that demands both advanced technical expertise and extensive experience in project management, a discipline which is likely to remain at a premium in the years to come. “As far as Africa is concerned I anticipate that in ten years time ESI International will definitely still be working on oil and gas projects,” predicts Sifri. “There will be sustained demand for industrial-related projects, and to a certain extent any kind of project that deals with natural resources, specifically water and other minerals. Meanwhile oil and gas corporations, as result of their own need for large-scale infrastructure, may also try and develop this kind of infrastructure,” continues Sifri, outlining the strength of demand for effective project management, demand that his company, by virtue of its commitment to rigour and in-depth experience, is uniquely well-placed to meet. 



George Sifri is a senior instructor/consultant with Educational Services Institute (ESI) International. He has more than 20 years of experience in the management of IT projects and has given numerous lectures and training courses on a wide range of topics, including strategic information systems, managing software development and relational databases. During his career he has worked with major companies like Motorola, HP and Dow Jones, as well as delivering courses and lectures across the world and regularly writing articles on project management.