

Specifics of Entry-Level IT Project Managers in Eastern Europe

ABSTRACT

In IT outsourcing efficient collaboration between the customer on the one hand and the project manager of the IT vendor company on the other hand is a critical factor for success. Often customers from Western Europe or United States try building collaboration with IT vendors in Eastern Europe without taking into account specifics of the project managers' mentality and cultural differences. This leads to confusion, miscommunication and missed expectations.

Some authors [1,2] have researched specifics of management in Russia in comparison to western management style.

In this paper we outline the specifics of IT-related management practices and entry-level project managers from Eastern European countries such as Russia, Belarus and/or Ukraine. Understanding these specifics prevents many conflicts between customers and managers. We suggest methodology that allows customers and IT companies to evaluate project managers' performance objectively using 5 criteria. This methodology allows customers to set realistic expectations about the management process and to have better control over it. The evaluation also allows IT vendors to proactively monitor the performance of their project managers and take corrective actions when necessary.

Keywords: Project management; Eastern Europe management specifics, outsourcing project management, communication in offshore projects, entry-level managers

[1] D. Dmitriev, Z. Dimitrieva, "Upravlenie Proektami. Prakticheskoe Rukovodstvo", Jurkniga, 2003

[2] E.M. Korotkov, "Konceptcija Rossijskogo Managementa", DeKA, 2004

Особенности начинающих руководителей IT проектов в странах Восточной Европы

ABSTRACT

В аутсорсинге ПО взаимодействие клиента с одной стороны и руководителя проекта IT-компнии с другой является критическим фактором успеха проекта. Часто клиенты из Западной Европы и США пытаются построить взаимодействие с IT компанией из Восточной Европы не учитывая специфики руководителей проектов, их менталитет и разницу культур. Это приводит к конфликтам, недопониманиям и обманутым ожиданиям.

Некоторые авторы [1,2] исследовали особенности Российского менеджмента по сравнению с западным стилем управления.

В этой статье показываются особенности управления IT проектами и начинающих руководиетелей этих проектов из стран Восточной Европы таких как Россия, Беларусь и Украина. Понимание этих особенностей предотвращает многие конфликты между клиентами и менеджерами. Предлагается методология, позволяющая клиентам и самим IT компаниям оценить эффективность руководителей проектов по 5 предложенным параметрам. Методология позволяет клиентам формировать реалистичные ожидания от процесса управления проектом и иметь более полный контроль над ним. Оценка также дает возможность IT компаниям корректировать программы обучения руководителей проектов.

Keywords: Управление проектами; специфика руководителей прекетов из Восточной Европы, управление аутсорсинговыми проектами, взаимодействия между клиентом и менеджером, начинающие менеджеры.

[1] D. Dmitriev, Z. Dimitrieva, "Upravlenie Proektami. Prakticheskoe Rukovodstvo", Jurkniga, 2003

[2] E.M. Korotkov, "Konceptija Rossijskogo Managementa", DeKA, 2004

1. INTRODUCTION

Career growth in the IT industry in Eastern European countries is often abnormally steep. A situation where the position of senior software engineer is taken by a developer who finished their university degree one or two years ago is quite typical. There are several reasons for that:

- High demand for IT specialists: Companies often attract potential employees with higher positions. Even if they see that the candidate does not fully correspond to the required position he/she may be accepted because the project starts shortly (or should have started already), and/or the candidate shows the ability to quickly catch up to the expected skill level.
- Specifics of higher education: Universities in Eastern-European countries are famous for the solid training and knowledge base they provide in science and engineering. However, these universities often give strong theoretical and academic knowledge while they lack in providing practical skills. This is especially typical for rapidly changing IT disciplines. To compensate for missing practical skills, students often start working part-time or even full time in the middle of their studies to gain hands-on experience. As a result, many graduates already have 2-3 years experience with live projects by the time they finish their education.
- Lack of common classification of IT positions: Different companies put different meanings and set different requirements for the same job titles.

The same is true for management positions. The situation with management resources is complicated by the fact that management disciplines (in contrast to technical sciences) do not have such strong educational traditions in Eastern European countries. Management as an educational discipline became popular and wide spread at the end of 1990's, and it is only in recent years that management courses were added to the curriculums of IT-related departments in the universities.

As a result, the roles, requirements and skills of project managers in Eastern-European countries are often different from those in Western Europe and the United States. Understanding these differences is important for both western enterprises and eastern development companies in order to set up successful development teams.

2. TYPICAL CAREER OF THE PROJECT MANAGER

The majority of project managers working in the IT industry in Eastern European countries took their positions after being developers or quality control engineers. We make this conclusion based on over 200 interviews with project managers in Belarus and Ukraine that we performed during more than 10 years at Intetics. We also used information that we received from our partners in other Eastern European countries and companies.

There are several characteristics which are quite common among Eastern European Project Managers in the IT industry. A typical “entry-level” project manager has a technical education and several years of experience in software development as a software engineer, senior software engineer (technical lead) or quality control engineer. They speak English and have experience in direct communication with customers on previous projects. They have estimated development efforts and created work breakdown structures. They have also created specifications and technical documentation. They usually have had several other software engineers reporting to them in previous assignments. They have succeeded in projects as a technical lead and demonstrated good communication with customers. They have read books on project management and are motivated to move from development to new responsibilities.

In many cases this is the basis from which project managers start their management experience.

3. CHARACTERISTIC PROBLEMS OF PROJECT MANAGERS AT THE START OF THEIR CAREER

The basic characteristics described in the previous section present a few common problem areas. These problem areas are described in this section.

3.1. FOCUSING ON THE PROCESSES RATHER THAN THE RESULT

Following their previous development experience people with such a focus tend to answer the question “how will this be done?” rather than “what will be done?” or “what is the purpose of the product?” They often do not see the global picture of business goals behind a set of features to be developed. This often leads to missing the expectations of customers, and results in unusable products. One of the examples of a shifted focus is harmony of system architecture and simplicity of implementation prevailing over product business goals. As a result features are being developed in a way different from what the business requires because it is technically easier to develop this way.

3.2. NO EXPERIENCE WITH FULL MANAGEMENT CONTROL LOOP

In the 4 steps of the management control loop (see Fig.1) the primary focus is given to development rather than communication or strategic planning.

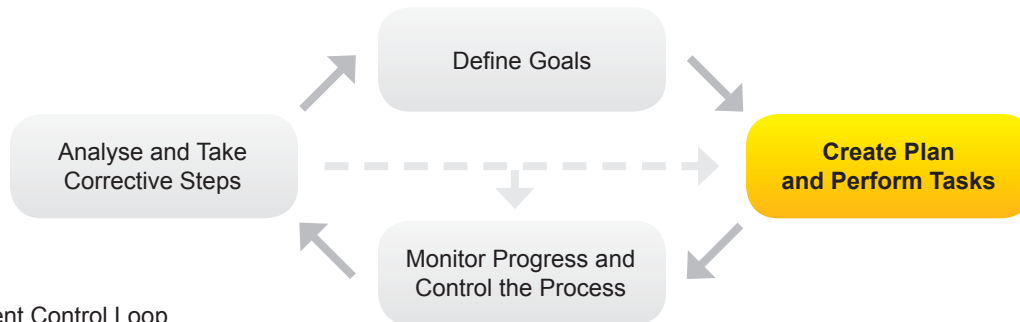


Fig.1 Management Control Loop

3.3. DEFENSIVE BEHAVIOR WHEN RESOLVING CONFLICT SITUATIONS

When conflict situations occur (which will happen on any project sooner or later) people with defensive behavior try to secure their position rather than solve the conflict or problem. Such people spend a lot of energy trying to justify their actions in the current situation rather than finding the solution and preventing similar problems in future. The justification, for example, sometimes takes the form of accusing third-party providers or even customers for not providing enough information, or giving vague requirements. Similar defensive behavior may be demonstrated in resolving conflict situations within the team, although this is more difficult to notice if you are working with a remote team.

Another reason for defensive behavior in conflict resolution may be the motivation to avoid rather than the motivation to achieve. These two motivation patterns refer to whether a person tends to conceptualize goals in terms of positive consequences to be achieved; or in terms of negative consequences to be avoided. People who are new to project management often demonstrate avoidance motivation.

Often, Eastern-Europeans take concerns raised by their colleagues or customers as personal accusations. If this happens, then they will often take defensive positions rather than to take steps to address issues constructively.

3.4. INSUFFICIENT AMOUNT OF COMMUNICATION

Entry-level managers usually do not communicate enough with customers and do not select the appropriate means of communication. In particular they do not use voice conversations (phone, skype phone, etc.) as frequently as needed, or as appropriately needed. Preference is given to sending emails or discussing the issues in instant messenger.

Although it is very important to document your decisions in written form (such as email) it is obvious that complex questions with a high level of uncertainty are much easier to be discussed by phone. Or, in another example, issues of great urgency should be discussed by phone to ensure timely resolution and effective communication can be achieved. This is much more efficient than having the entire discussion in the email form.

The reason for such underuse of “live” communication and voice communication in particular, lies in a language barrier and partially in a focus shifted from the result to the processes as were mentioned above. The manager is more interested in how the particular feature will be developed and shifts attention and thought away from discussing why this feature should function in the specified way. Lost to the manager then, is what the strategic goal is, and how this module fits into the strategy.

4. USING THE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PROBLEM AREAS

The problem areas described in the previous section are the most common that we at Intetics have experienced with project managers who started their management career after being developers or quality control engineers. Since the majority of project managers in the IT industry in Eastern European countries become project managers in this way, these problem areas are in our opinion typical.

We emphasize that these problem areas are typical in the beginning of their management career. As they become more experienced they improve their skills in these areas and become mature professionals capable of doing complicate projects efficiently. There are two reasons why we should be aware of these problem areas:

- customers should be aware of possible problems and specifics of project managers so that they can collaborate efficiently
- project coordinators supervising the manager’s work should eliminate the existing problem areas

4.1. HOW CUSTOMERS CAN USE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE PROBLEM AREAS

Customers who start a project with an offshore development team need to know the level of project and relationship management they will receive. They need to evaluate this level and set up realistic expectations about communication and management processes for the project. As the project manager is often a single point of contact between the customer and the team, choosing a proper project manager and setting up efficient communication channels with him have crucial importance in the outcome of the project.

Therefore customers need to know what to look for in order to ensure the collaboration with the project manager. It is vital to know how equipped the project manager is to overcome the problem areas listed above. If some of these problems are common for the project manager, and customers can recognize this, the following are some recommendations to be performed in order to prevent possible negative consequences:

- the customer can compensate for the problem areas by devoting additional time and resources to monitoring the manager's activities in these areas or even perform some of the activities themselves.
- the customer can point out to the project manager that special attention should be paid to particular activities. Sometimes the customer can approach the supervisor of the project manager with this issue to request assistance in resolving the issue.
- the customer can request replacing the project manager on the project. We believe that this measure should be the last to be used. This should only be an option if other actions do not bring the results required, or if the problem areas are simply too large and would require too great an effort to resolve.

Realizing the strengths and weaknesses of the project manager will help customers set up an efficient communication and collaboration strategy with him.

4.2. HOW DEVELOPMENT COMPANIES CAN USE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE PROBLEM AREAS

Project coordinators or other people supervising the project manager's work should be aware of these problem areas. They should efficiently recognize them and take all necessary corrective actions including (but not limited to) educational programs. This will help project managers improve faster in these areas and should help prevent future problems. The methods of recognizing these areas and improving in them are suggested in the next section.

5. METHODOLOGY FOR EVALUATING PROJECT MANAGERS

In this section we provide recommendations on identifying the problem areas mentioned in the beginning of this paper.

These recommendations are based on our experience in resolving more than 200 conflict situations and complaints over the last 7 years of tracking corresponding records in our Company.

We suggest evaluating project managers based on several criteria and subsequently grade their level of performance in each area on a scale from 1 (corresponding skills completely missing) to 5 (Role-model type performer).

Some of the criteria may be graded at the moment when the project manager is being selected on the basis of his resume and/or interview. Others can be evaluated only based on the manager's performance during the actual work on the project.

The areas and suggested rules are listed in the sections below. The grades are followed by the characteristics of the corresponding project manager's behavior.

5.1. PROJECT MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE

This area can be evaluated before the actual work on the project starts, based on the project manager's resume and interview.

Grade 1. Has more than 1 year of experience in managing commercial projects

Grade 2. Has positive references from customers of projects he has managed over the last 2 years

Grade 3. Has certificates or records proving he has passed advanced training courses in management-specific disciplines (i.e. PMP)

Grade 4. Has successful experience in managing a project of a scope (in development efforts) that is comparable with the size of the new project on which the manager will be assigned. We consider the size to be comparable only if the new project does not exceed the previous projects in the manager's experience by more than 50%. For example if the project manager has successful experience with a 10 man*month project then the comparable size of the new project is not more that 15 man*months.

Grade 5. Has more than 3 years of experience in managing projects exceeding the size of the new project.

5.2. FOCUSING ON THE RESULT

The following areas are mainly evaluated during communication and collaboration between the customer and project manager.

Grade 1. Has no comprehensive understanding of the business goals of the system, acts only according to the detailed specification without validating the functionality against business reasonability.

The customer can validate this by asking the project manager to describe the business purpose and workflow of some complicated modules of the system. These questions can be asked after the project manager confirms that the goals of the project and requirements of the system are clear to him.

Grade 2. Understands the business goals of the system but simplicity of implementation is given more importance than the business requirements of the product.

The indication of this are features being developed in a different way than the business requires. Often this is done at the expense of the product usability. Another indication of this problem is the PM's strong refusal to implement a feature in a requested way on the pretext of technical complexity or impossibility and without suggesting equivalent alternative solutions.

Grade 3. Understands business goals and elaborates general high-level requirements into detailed specifications and a prototype in accordance with the business purpose of the product. In decisions regarding functional requirements, the PM relies mainly on the information received from the customer.

Grade 4. Researches the subject area of the project, learns competitor products and approaches, and systematizes received data. Elaborates general high-level requirements into detailed specifications and a prototype in accordance with the business purpose of the product. In decisions regarding functional requirements relies on the information received from the customer and on the market best practices based on customer analysis.

The indication of this approach is when the project manager references competitors' examples and approaches when discussing functionality with the customer.

Grade 5. Regularly provides suggestions about the improvements and modifications in the design and functionality of the system. The provided improvements bring additional business value to the product, correct business-related oversights in the initial system specification or design and optimize business processes of the system

5.3. EXPERIENCE IN ALL STEPS OF THE MANAGEMENT CONTROL LOOP

Grade 1. There is no project plan, and the project manager cannot tell the delivery date for the current iteration and high-level time and budget (efforts) constraints of the entire project.

Grade 2. There is a project plan for the current iteration, but it is not updated regularly. Status reports are not being sent to the customer regularly.

Grade 3. The project plan for the current iteration is kept up-to date. At any moment the project manager can determine whether the development is going along with the initial plan and what the adjusted delivery dates are. Project status reports are regularly communicated to the customer.

Grade 4. The project plan and development process are regularly monitored by the project manager and deviations from the original plan are detected at early stages (within the first 50-75% of the time of the iteration). The corrective actions (e.g . changing the scope of the iterations, shifting time frames, adding resources, etc.) are suggested in a timely manner to the customer and implemented within the current iteration.

Grade 5. All aspects of the development process are monitored and analyzed by the project manager. The problems are analyzed and generalized and the corrections are made to the development process so that similar problems do not occur in future.

The indications of such an approach are: team retrospective meetings that are held after each iteration; and suggestions about process improvements that the project manger discusses with the customer.

5.4. APPROACH TO RESOLVING CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Grade 1. Tries to secure his position rather than solve the conflict or problem. Tries to find justifications for his actions, and/or blames others rather than finding a solution and preventing similar problems in future. Can sometimes deny that the problem exists.

Grade 2. Admits problems, but takes problem reports or concerns raised by the customer personally. Does not demonstrate a constructive approach to problem solving. Finds irrelevant arguments and excuses that do not have direct relation to the problem.

Grade 3. Admits problems but is not willing to find a win-win solution. Often takes the position that nothing can be improved in the situation. May start finding the solution after several sequential requests or after a serious conversation with the customer.

Grade 4. Admits problems and suggests solutions. Often the approach is not systematic enough and the suggested solutions are targeted at eliminating the symptoms of the problem rather than resolving the root cause.

Grade 5. Demonstrates a structured approach to the problem and conflict resolution. Formulates the problem, identifies the symptoms and possible causes, analyzes possible solutions, discusses possible alternative solutions with the customer and makes recommendations on choosing the best course of action. Implements the solution and monitors the changes.

5.5. INSUFFICIENT AMOUNT OF COMMUNICATION

Grade 1. Does not initiate any communication with the customer unless required to.

Grade 2. Uses only email to communicate with the customer.

Grade 3. Regularly uses emails and instant messaging tools for communication with the customer. Has difficulties with voice communication.

Grade 4. Uses phone (voice) conversations with the customer, but usually does not initiate them. Sends follow-up notes after the conversations.

Grade 5. Efficiently uses different means of communication including emails, IM, audio conferencing, desktop sharing and video conferencing. Regularly initiates phone or similar voice communication sessions with the customer. Efficiently communicates with all stakeholders and interested parties of the project on behalf of the customer.

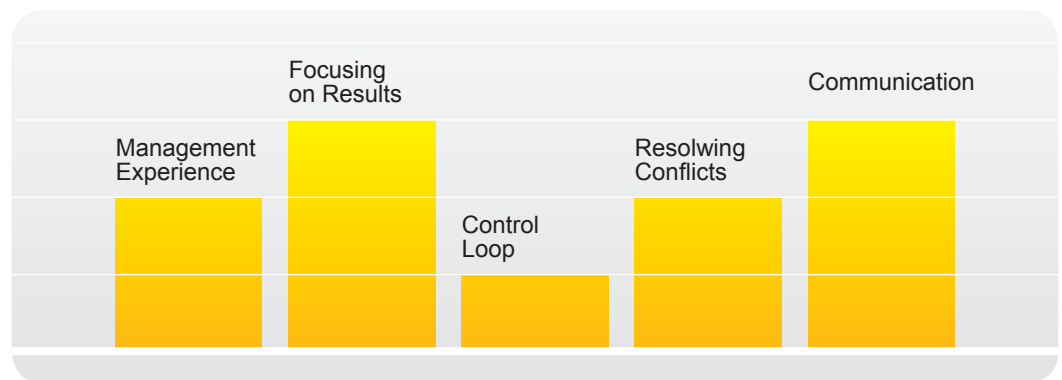


Fig.2 Manager Profile

Usually there should be at least one phone or Skype conversation with the customer per week to maintain the minimal level of communication and information sharing. The amount of communication should be much higher during the analysis-intensive stages of the project, such as requirements definitions or iteration scope definitions.

6. ANALYZING THE RESULTS

The rules described above allow grading the level of project manager in the specified areas based on the experience the customer has during their collaboration. The results may be illustrated as seen in the manager profile in Fig 2.

The profile illustrates which areas may be the causes of existing or future problems. Our experience shows that on successful projects, the lack of the project manager's experience in some areas is compensated for by the additional efforts of the customer in those same areas. If for example a grade for an aspect of the Management Control Loop is low, then the customer might request project plan updates and status reports more often. Or, the customer may initiate retrospective meetings after each iteration.

Alternatively, the customer may indicate this problem area to the project managers' supervisor on vendor's side, who will then take care of monitoring and improving the particular problem area.

The development companies (vendors) should have their own mechanisms of evaluating problem areas of their project managers and take corrective measures proactively. The corrections may come in the forms of individual mentoring or group workshops.

We at Intetics perform regular monitoring of project managers' work to prevent management-related risks at an early stage. The monitoring consists of two major components: First, project management inspections and regular customer satisfaction surveys. Secondly, based on the results of these activities, corrective measures for each particular project are developed and monitored by the project management director. Typical problems are discussed in regular workshops attended by all project managers.

Many of the problems mentioned in this article are common to all entry-level project managers from around the world. However, our experience shows that in Eastern Europe, a person can become a project manager earlier than their western counterparts. They are not only younger but also have a less solid educational background in such areas as communication, planning and conflict resolution. This makes us believe that the management-related problems described above are more specific to Eastern European companies and have a stronger impact on their relationships with their western clients.

The knowledge of these specifics helps us set up and maintain efficient collaboration procedures on our projects and reveal possible problems at early stages. This contributes greatly to the success of our projects and the delight of our clients.