New Names for Old Games
Rebadging Sound & Proven PM Concepts

I know that it annoys my wife, but I hate to throw things out. So my closets are chock full of narrow ties and with suits sporting inch and a half lapels. "They're are passé" she'll say. "Heck no", I reply, "they'll be back".

If you've managed to live through five decades of wearing ties, then you know that wide and narrow ties have come and gone and returned again. Likewise with lapel sizes. And if you've labored through four decades of the study and practice of project management, you see similar recycling of earlier concepts.

The same old themes return, time and time again, under new labels. Some are claimed to be "revolutionary". But, frankly, most are reinventions of the wheel. Not that the wheel is a bad thing. Where would we be without it? But today's wheels do much of the same thing as they did in ancient days.

What we are seeing, most of the time, is a rebadging of an earlier idea or process. Often, in doing so, the application of the rebadged concepts is clarified and improved. It is really this enhancement of the concepts that leads us to herald a new paradigm, forgetting that the concepts have been with us for years.

During the past few years, several new models have emerged on the project management scene. Among these are: Project Portfolio Management, Critical Chain, Professional Services Automation, Stage/Gate, and Cross-disciplinary teams. These are exciting and valuable concepts. But they are not new.

These so-called new models are, for the most part, a rediscovery of tried and true concepts that have stayed with us through the years because they represent a practical, common sense approach to addressing the needs of the project management community.

Cross-disciplinary Teams

Let's take a look at cross-disciplinary teams and other models of teamocracy. Certainly, we have come to recognize that the rigid bureaucratic structure, with fixed boundaries, is detrimental to prompt and effective resolution of project problems. The team model has emerged as a means of achieving more rapid response and action, as well as promoting wider input into the solution.

But, new, it is not. Back in the sixties, a project that I was working on came to a total halt when the design of a major component of a nuclear reactor was found to be faulty. We convened a "Task Force" comprising all of the involved disciplines, for a thirteen week program to resolve the critical problem and get the project back on track.

In the early seventies, I was asked to prepare a strategic plan for an engineering-design group. We convened a temporary, cross-disciplinary strategic planning "committee" which developed the required plan.

In the later seventies, we were asked to develop an entire new process for managing projects at our Division. Again, a "special team" was put together, comprised of six individuals, from various groups concerned with project success. This team worked together for a couple of years, determining needs, developing new processes, training personnel and implementing the new practices. During that period, we all continued to perform our regular duties, within our individual components, while also executing our special team obligations.

I am happy to report that all of these "team" situations were very successful, and that the results could not have been achieved without going to the team model. But, as you can see, this team model is far from being new.

Stage/Gate

This one, also called "phase-gate", sounds like a Ronald Reagan defense system, but it's a "new" concept for managing projects in the new product development arena. But what is really new? In many projects, especially in new product development (NPD), we proceed in steps, stages or phases. At each step, decisions are made. These may include (1) which direction to go in, (2) which option to choose, (3) how much to invest in the next phase, (4) go/no-go decisions, (5) project termination, (6) pause and regroup, (7) add or reduce scope, etc. Such steps may involve new authorizations or new funding.

Is this anything new? Intelligent use of PM software would have us identify such key points in the project. The software would alert us to such pending milestones (gates) so that we can address these stage/gates. I laugh at those vendors who would advertise these as "new" capabilities. But I applaud them for broadcasting a clear emphasis on this "gate" process. It is an essential part of the management of NPD projects.

Critical Chain

A new name for an old game. Kudos to Eliyahu Goldratt for his delightful discourse on this topic, in his book "Critical Chain", and for his codifying of the concept of shared contingency. Sorry, Eli, but I wrote about shared contingency several years before your book. And so have others.

But, no doubt, Goldratt has popularized and brought this important concept out in the open and spawned a few supporting computer programs, such as ProChain Project Scheduling and a new component in Scitor's Project Scheduler 8. He has also developed a loyal group of disciples, who extol the virtues of Critical Chain, shoot down any of its critics, and champion the cause of this "new" scheduling elixir.

Putting any pride of ownership aside, the concepts of Critical Chain deserve our attention. It makes absolute sense to move the inferred (but undefined) contingency out of individual tasks and to grouped calculated contingency in a shared buffer. This has always been an option in traditional critical path programs (without the buffer analysis), and does not require the abandoning of such programs just to adopt the shared contingency protocol.

If you were to adopt the full critical chain philosophy and support programs, you would also have to adopt the full set of rules and processes associated with critical chain, and abandon many of the important features of traditional CPM, such as earned value and milestones. So, be sure that you want to do this before changing over to the "new" scheduling system. But either way, shared contingency is available to you ... under the old badge of CPM or the new badge of Critical Chain.

Project Portfolio Management

One of the hot topics in the management of the enterprise is Project Portfolio Management. In Project Portfolio Management, it is assumed that the enterprise, via the selection and execution of projects, positions itself for increased strength and profitability as well as assuring that the firm continues to thrive in a world of constant change and the threat of competition.

The basic elements of Project Portfolio Management are not new. Nor is the environment in which it is applied. However, before the emergence of Project Portfolio Management, as a defined discipline, these elements were the responsibility of two distinct groups; Operations Management and Projects Management. Each group had its specific role. On the Operations Management side, attention was given to Objectives, Goals, Strategies, Project Selection & Mix, and Cash Flow. On the Projects Management side, we look at: Schedule/Time, Project Cost, Performance, Stakeholder Satisfaction, and Scope/Change Control.

So what we have here is a rebadging of these two disciplines in an environment that bridges the gap between Operations Management and Project Management. As with any of the other topics in this paper, a solution requires the implementation of both the methodologies and the tools to support Project Portfolio Management. To date, there has been more talk on the subject than substance. Look for tools that address enterprise and project objectives and tie them to project planning and control systems.

Professional Services Automation

Professional Services Automation (PSA) is an amalgam of Project Management (PM) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), focusing on resource management (or human capital) like time, knowledge, skills and business relationships, as opposed to simple task management.

Several years ago, ERP emerged as an enterprise system designed to integrate the finance, human resources, and projects aspects of the business and to improve on the automation of the processes and the flow of information between them. The primary industries to apply these systems were manufacturing and process oriented businesses. The systems were concerned more with products and inventories as opposed to services.

The primary focus of PSA solutions is Professional Services Organizations (PSOs) and internal IT departments. PSOs are service companies (e.g., consulting, advertising, IT management consultants) that require more detail and specialization than current PM

software can accommodate. They not only need to manage activities, but also to make simulations before planning a project so they can forecast possible sell time (what they charge the client), pre-billing, and review approval processes.

Not unlike PSOs, internal IT departments are confronted with shrinking resources and demands for increased performance. They differ in that they primarily serve internal constituents and must find ways to manage skills, schedule resources, forecast budgeting and costing, perform quality and risk management, and assess progress at any time during the lifecycle.

PSOs

The growth of service-oriented companies has created the need for detailed resource management and planning. PSA solutions work to automate as much of the sales cycle as possible. This includes managing leads, managing contacts, drafting proposals and bids, managing projects, and performing win/loss analysis. PSA software allows for the storing of detailed customer information including contact information, competitor bids and proposals, as well as any documents that relate to a given opportunity. The software allows the PSO to know the needs and habits of prospective clients so that it can generate successful bids.

IT Departments

Traditionally IT departments turned to PM solutions as they saw tasks to be completed as simple projects. With dwindling resources and increased time and efficiency pressures, IT departments have found needed functionality with PSA solutions. Managers can search across programs and projects and access very detailed information on employees to find the closest desired match in a weighted manner, which is dynamic in certain instances. This includes the ability for parametric (case based reasoning) searches. IT departments have found PSA solutions beneficial in searching for employees, staffing programs and projects, and program management office (PMO) automation (i.e., document management, knowledge management, workflow).

Typical PSA software is a collection of any of the following capabilities: Sales Force Automation (SFA), Opportunity Management, Resource Management, Human Resources , Program/Project Management, Time and Expense Management (T&E), Document Management, Knowledge or Practice Management, Invoicing & Billing (Financials), and Customer Relationship Management.

Through the PSA portals, many PSA systems have partnered with human resource outsourcing companies. The internal PSA system is used to identify resource needs, which are then moved through the portal to search for resource matches from resource suppliers.

So here again, we have a repackaging of existing capabilities, addressing the needs of a newly identified market and bringing to that market a set of seamless, automated solutions specifically designed for their business purposes.

Rebadging is Good

So here we have some new and popular protocols: Project Portfolio Management, Critical Chain, Professional Services Automation, Stage/Gate, and Cross-disciplinary teams. Do they represent new paradigms? Not really! They are more of a natural outgrowth of earlier thinking and capabilities.

Please don't take my use of the term "rebadging" as a pejorative. On the contrary, the repackaging and rebadging of existing practices and capabilities is usually efficient and effective. Why should people have to use systems that were designed for foreign applications? Why should they have to use tools that employ irrelevant jargon and that are patched together from pieces of systems that were designed for other purposes?

No, these rebadged systems are just what the doctor ordered for today's enterprise management needs. The roots may not be new, but so what? It makes perfect sense to build on what has worked for other applications and enhance and adapt these systems to new environments.

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He has implemented or enhanced the project management capabilities of numerous firms, often combined with the selection or implementation of computerized project management tools. Mr. Levine is considered the leading consultant to the project management software industry and is recognized as the leading expert in tools for project management.

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