

Is there REALLY a Difference between Women and Men as Project Managers?

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Abstract— Women are key players in modern project management. Although the field of project management began as a male dominated activity, primarily in engineering and construction, women moved decisively into project management, including in engineering and construction. This paper reports on research examining the perceptions and attitudes of women in project management through both women and men's views about what is important to project managers. A number of issues identified as important by practicing women project managers evolved into a set of questions about these issues. A pilot evaluation using a small group of women project managers provided suggestions for improving clarity and content for several of the questions. Using these improvements, members of two large Project Management Institute chapters, one in the United States and another in New Zealand, responded to the questions. This paper presents the responses of both the men and women participants from these countries to the questions, and posits some insights about the meaning of those responses to the issues identified by women project managers.

Keywords— Project Management, Women Project Managers, Women's Issues in Project Management

I. INTRODUCTION

Women may be the perfect project managers! Programmed by evolution toward nurturing, and groomed by culture to handle multiple, simultaneous activities, women appear to possess inherent abilities and practical skills needed in the role of project manager.

Research findings at the University of California support this idea: "When it comes to the best managerial skills, women may have an advantage over men"[1]. This study found that women have stronger communication, empathy, and better response to stress skills than men. A study of 26,000 large and small Japanese companies found women employees were important to company financial results: "...the higher a company's ratio of female employees, the greater its profitability"[2]. These and other examples do not however, imply that women in business are all homogenous [3].

Women are in fact as individually diverse as their male counterparts. This research explores the depth of what is important to practicing women project managers. The overarching research questions were to determine the interests and concerns of women project managers, and do women project managers emphasize the same project management characteristics as men project managers?

Specific responses addressed in the paper are to the following questions:

- What is your motivation to stay in project management?
- What provides you satisfaction in your job?
- What are the biggest challenges for you as a project manager?
- How important is risk taking in managing projects and how do you manage risk in your projects?

The findings to these questions are particularly relevant as women assume an increasing role as project managers in a wide range of industries.

II. METHODOLOGY

Because the majority of project management research addresses men's perceptions and concerns, we chose to ask a group of practicing women project managers what they thought were the important issues for them in project management.

A set of twenty-four issues collected from the Women's Forum organization of the Project Management Institute's (PMI) California Silicon Valley chapter identified areas that were most important to them. This set of issues fit nicely into four groups of personal issues, personal characteristics, methods of managing, and how others saw them. A set of questions requiring narrative responses was developed and tested using a pilot group of Women's Forum members to verify that the questions were clear and well understood. A final questionnaire of twenty-eight questions included twelve issues in the three areas of Personal Information, Personal Characteristics, and Methods of Managing.

The questionnaire was sent to all Silicon Valley California and New Zealand PMI Chapter members. Of the twenty-nine usable responses from the Silicon Valley chapter eleven were from women and eighteen from men, and from the New Zealand chapter's nineteen responses, seven were from women and twelve from men. These numbers may reflect the ratio of men and women members in these two organizations.

The low response from both chapters may be partially due to the need to provide narrative versus check-the-box answers typical of many questionnaires. This however, makes the responses even more valuable because the respondents took their precious time to think about and write out their comments. The rich questionnaire results

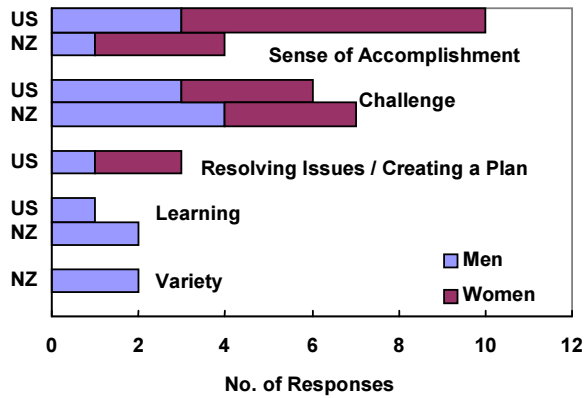


Fig. 1. Internal Motivation to Stay as Project Managers

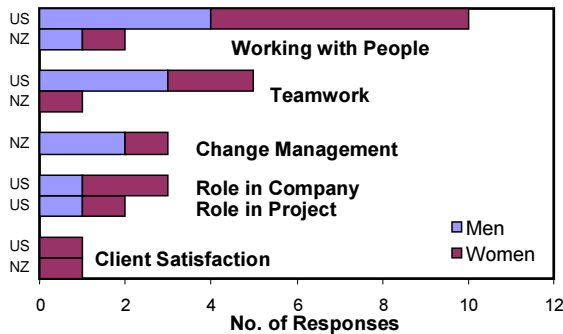


Fig. 2. External Motivators to Stay in Project Management

were collected into a spreadsheet for analysis. Responses to the four questions in the introduction were selected for reporting on in this paper. The findings presented below contrast the responses between the women and men respondents, and also between the respondents of the two countries.

III. RESULTS

A. Motivation to Stay in Project Management

In reviewing the findings under the general heading of How You Became a Project Manager, responses to the question, “What is your motivation to stay in project management?” revealed two primary areas of focus. One was internally focused about how they felt, and the other externally focused about their pleasure in being a project manager. Internal focus is defined as *within one's self* and external focus is *outside of one's self*.

Fig. 1 and 2 display the responses of United States women and men participants and shows external motivators slightly outweighing internal motivators. Women indicate more internal motivation than men, especially in Sense of Accomplishment (Fig. 2). Men show slightly more external motivation than women, except for a slightly greater motivation for women in Working With People.

Contrasting the women and men's responses from the US and NZ participants about their Motivation to Stay in Project Management, a number of differences appear. The number of responses received from the US was greater than the number from New Zealand with a notable difference between more a uniform US distribution between Internal and External motivators, while the NZ distribution is decidedly more toward Internal influence. Also, there was a stronger Internal motivator of Challenge as the overriding motivator in the NZ responses, while the strongest US motivator was an External, Working With People motivator.

Women responses from both countries favored the Internal over External motivators. Challenge and Sense of Accomplishment accounted for the majority of responses, but US women favored Sense of Accomplishment over Challenge, while they were about the same for the NZ women. The US women favored the External motivator of Working With People while the NZ women showed little preference at all for External motivators.

US men respondents favored External over Internal motivation with Working With People and Teamwork as the strongest motivators. The NZ men favored the Internal motivator Challenge as the strongest overall with the remainder distributed across many motivators. Some of the NZ men indicated Learning as an Internal motivator while none of the US men did so. This was reversed for Teamwork with several responses among the US men but none for the NZ men.

B. Job Satisfaction

This survey question was selected for analysis to understand what contributes to a project manager being satisfied in their job. As seen in Fig.3, responses from both the U.S. and N.Z. project managers strongly stated

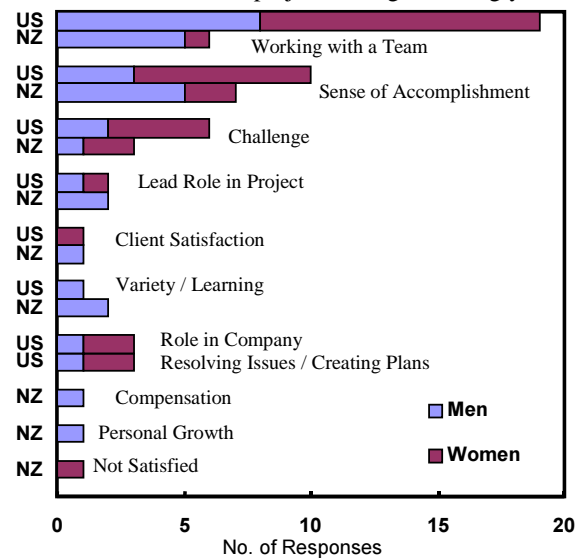


Fig. 3. Job Satisfaction

that “Working with a Team” and “A Sense of Accomplishment” provided satisfaction from their job. The next highest factor in job satisfaction was the “Challenge” of the job, such as the project or managing the team.

In comparing the U.S. women’s responses to the men’s inputs, more women stated the top three factors than men. This quantity of responses was due to the amount of inputs provided by the women were more detailed than the men’s responses. There may be some slight cultural difference between the N.Z. and U.S. women since “Sense of Accomplishment” and “Challenge” was mentioned slightly more often than “Working with a Team”.

There was also some variety in responses identifying other factors such as “Client Satisfaction”, “Role in Company” and “Personal Growth” that may have been identified by only the U.S. or N.Z. but not both. There was one response from a N.Z. woman who was considering leaving project management due to her personal interests and resource skill levels.

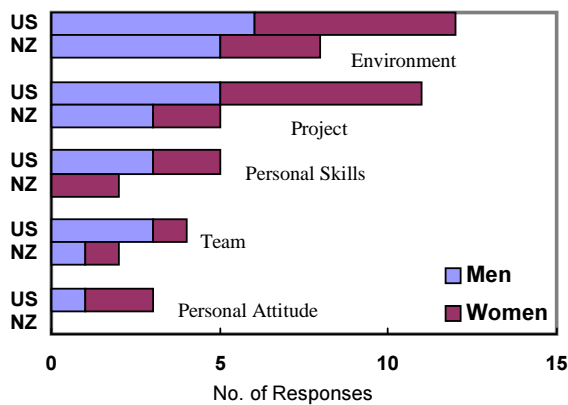


Fig. 4. Job Challenges

C. Challenges

To contrast to the Job Satisfaction topic, the question “What are the biggest challenges for you as a project manager” had a wide variety of responses. The factors can be grouped into four categories: company or project Environment, the Project itself, their Personal Skills, the Team or their Personal Attitude.

The biggest identified challenges for both survey groups were in Environment and Project in the identical ranking. Environment included factors such as management’s lack of understanding, stakeholders’ hidden agenda, customer’s expectations and getting blamed for the project failures. Working in a matrix environment and lack of processes were also included in this category. Project consisted of responses such as scope creep, balancing scope / budget / schedule, and monitoring results.

When comparing the U.S. women’s and men’s responses, the amount of responses was fairly equal regarding “Environment” and “Project”. This was not the situation with the responses from N.Z. men where they emphasized the top two factors, yet did not mention anything about their personal skills. What is also interesting is that the N.Z. project managers did not mention “Personal Attitude” as a challenge.

D. Risk Taking

US participants’ responses to the level of importance of risk centered on three major areas of, Important, Necessary, and Project Inherent. How their risk was dealt with fell into the three major categories of Analyze, Manage, and Recognize.

Fig. 5 shows the distribution between the Importance of risk and Addressing risk. The NZ responses to the level of importance of risk centered on three major areas of, Important, Necessary, and Project Dependent. The one similar category that may mean the same thing, identified risk as “Inherent” in US responses and the NZ responses indicated risk as “Project Dependent.” The difference may be an assumption in the US responses that “all” projects have risk while the NZ responses were more, “it depends on the project.”

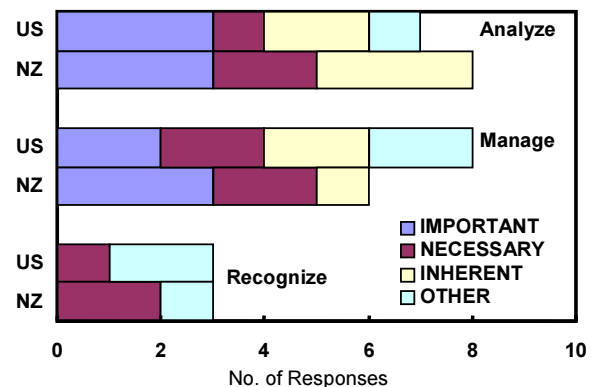


Fig. 5. Risk-Taking Attitude

IV. DISCUSSION

Reviewing the study data, it appears that as a group US and NZ project managers favor similar motivators but with different priorities. The preference for Internal and External motivators is reversed in strength between the two groups, with much more emphasis on Internal by the NZ respondents. This pattern continues when comparing just the men in the two groups. The NZ respondents favored Internal motivators and the US respondents favored External. US women favored an External, Working with

People, while it was not a factor with the NZ women, but both NZ women and US favored the Internal Sense of Accomplishment and Challenge.

The result of the Job Satisfaction responses echoes the motivation to continue in this profession. Interestingly only one person mentioned compensation and personal growth, but this may have implied with the responses of Role in Company and Variety / Learning. It's clear that the US women project managers are equally satisfied through accomplishment and working as the US men. In comparison, NZ women appear to be also interested in the Challenge equivalent to their US counterparts.

For both US and NZ project managers, the Challenges of the job comes from either the environment or the project itself. This could be construed that the culture of the business becomes a significant influence on the success of the project and the project manager. Numerous studies have been conducted on the importance of having a business environment that supports project management in order for successful projects.

Project managers are not a risk averse group, since they like a challenge and want to be achievers in a team environment. The majority of the respondents indicated a proactive attitude towards risk, so this may be an indicator of personal confidence and capability if one is prepared for the worse.

Can valid conclusions be drawn from the general comparisons of the data? Due to the small sample size of participants it would be inappropriate to try to generalize these findings to a larger general population. Anecdotally however, these findings appear to fit with findings from other studies about the characteristics of project managers [4]. That women feel a greater Sense of Accomplishment in project management than the men appears reasonable as they are competing in the formerly man-dominated profession of project management. It also appears reasonable that women's focus is more Internal than the men's with the one exception that the women's External focus is higher in Working with People than the men's.

V. CONCLUSION

As project managers, issues that were identified by women were also common to the men in this profession with comparable levels of concern. Working with people as a team leader in accomplishing the project objectives was a consistent theme overall. From the data of this study, one cannot necessarily conclude that there is a significant difference between women and men project managers, but working with a team and accomplishment are slightly stronger motivators for women than for men to remain in the profession.

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