Management of Distributed Projects

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A number of business and technical forces are changing the fundamentals of project management as it had been developed over the past decades. First, globalization of markets and competition forces the integration of global managerial and business processes in corporations, many times involving people working from geographically distributed sites. Second, organizations are increasingly adopting a strategy of global sourcing, resulting in intensive cooperation projects including professionals from multiple organizations. Third, cooperation from distributed sites around the world enables organizations to benefit from differences of time zones between locations. Improvement of project cycle time becomes feasible in such a distributed environment. Fourth, advanced Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) enable cooperation in a distributed mode. Technologies like groupware and videoconferencing enable organizations to engage in international projects with relative affordability. Thus, multinational organizations tap in local sources of competence and leverage this knowledge on a global scale.

The confluence of these trends has given rise to new organizational forms which, enabled by advanced ICT, are labeled “virtual organizations”. The focus of this minitrack is on projects that increasingly occur within or between these types of organization. These so-called “virtual projects” involve people cooperating from internationally distributed sites and even different organizations. Professionals working in a geographically distributed fashion participate in multi-cultural and cross functional projects with a global focus. These virtual projects pose new challenges to project management practitioners and researchers.

Indeed, we have three papers in this minitrack which as a set address some of these important challenges. First, Marttin, Lehto, and Nyman present a framework for analyzing and developing work activities in multi-site projects. They empirically test their framework on two R&D distributed projects at Nokia. Their approach proposes a visually appealing and inexpensive way to collect and analyze data to help managers to pick up on problem areas in distributed projects.

Next, Bourgault, Lefebvre, Lefebvre, Pellerin and Elia raise an issue which is likely to become very important in the near future. They argue that since distributed projects are fundamentally different from co-located projects, a new set of metrics is needed. Their proposal of new metrics is then empirically explored using a re-manufacturing project.

In the third paper, Hess presents VICPLAN, a prototype designed to support the management of distributed projects. Several design issues are discussed.

We are very excited about the growing interest we see worldwide in the area of the management of distributed projects. Although a reality for business, there is still a lot to be researched and understood. We hope that this first set of papers stimulates further investigation and creative thinking in this area.