

# Blended learning offers ideal training approach for PM

Tony Marks

As a profession, project management is weathering the recession particularly well. However, the risks and stakes involved in many projects are much higher now and so good, qualified project managers are highly sought after.

This trend is partly due to the higher capital value of projects and partly because of the greater opportunity cost to the investing organisation. Structured training and personal development is therefore winning over a former expectation to 'learn on the job', usually from mistakes. With the new academic year about to start, September is a time when many people will be reflecting upon their own options for training and education, with a view to further career progression.



## Greater retention and engagement levels

Blended learning is a buzzword frequently banded about in training circles. It essentially means training that combines online learning with classroom-based tuition and its popularity is growing fast. This is because studies have shown that it fosters higher student engagement, increased learner retention levels and generally has a positive impact on training attitudes.

This type of learning environment is particularly applicable to project management. Projects by their nature require a lot of on-site working, sometimes in extreme environments. This doesn't always lend itself well to traditional, classroom-based learning. Courses continue, however, to be a very important aspect of training because of the way they allow students to reflect on what they know already, share experiences with peers and apply their learning to an industry environment. There is significant evidence to support the move to blended learning environments, which have been shown to be highly beneficial for students. In this situation, the training is partly classroom-based and partly self-directed within an advanced e-learning environment.

Consider a traditional four day project management course that would have been conducted entirely in the classroom in the past. With a blended learning approach, the same course would involve two days of classroom training and a further two days worth of training completed online. This could be done over a three month period enabling the student to fit the course around existing commitments.

As training providers, our experience working with a blended learning approach has been that it can deliver exceptional results. It helps students to reinforce training content in their own time, either individually or as part of a study group. Students are given the opportunity to reflect further on what they discussed in the classroom and can apply it to further scenarios, perhaps as part of an assessment or coursework. Sharing experiences is particularly relevant in project management training. So much of the learning process involves talking to people with similar experiences, whether that is done face-to-face in a classroom or online in a support group.

## Study at a convenient and flexible pace

Today's blended learning environments therefore offer a high level of flexibility allowing students to complement existing training and study at their own pace. They also facilitate the necessary levels of

interactivity amongst students, with online interactive mentoring, international discussion forums and virtual classrooms. In some instances, live tutors deliver lectures via a webcam to students based anywhere and can also offer one-to-one coaching on specific issues.

Compare this with a 100% online training course. It might be possible to cover the content of the syllabus by distance learning but the student would lack the contextual insight they get from a group discussion. Being a good project manager is so much more than simply passing endless exams. The insight a student can gain when interacting with a tutor who can help them apply a theoretical discussion to their own industry, is invaluable. This is especially so with more advanced training, or for courses focussing on the development of specific soft skills - leadership or negotiation for example. With a blended learning approach, the student can learn the functional and theoretical skills elements of their courses via distance e-learning and verify this with online assessment prior to attending any classroom training. This in turn means that they can apply their new knowledge and skills and relate them to real-life scenarios and job roles.

Many of 20I20's clients prefer their staff to learn on-site rather than attend off-site training programmes – especially in industries like oil and gas where it is often very impractical to attend off-site courses. On-site learning programmes like the blended learning approach, allow 20I20 to train more people working across a larger international footprint than just the UK. This makes it much more cost-effective and allows for greater process consistency.

## 140 delegates across four continents

As part of the test phase when developing the 20I20Academy, we delivered four initial courses via the blended learning model. These included the APM's Intro to PM Certificate as well as bespoke competency baselines and organisational maturity assessments. 20I20 currently has 140 students based in four continents using its blended learning environment. The 20I20 Academy is also used to deliver a CMI management training programme developed for oilfield specialists, EXPRO. This course was designed to be completed over a 12 month period and combines introductory classroom based sessions with online assignments on variety of topics plus all relevant course materials. Since their course environment includes discussion forums, EXPRO also uses the 20I20 Academy as a reliable means of communicating with each other.

## Tips for Trainers - Evaluating a Blended Learning Environment

*When selecting how a blended learning training programme might fit within your own organisation it is important to consider the following:*

**Culture.** How will a combined e-learning and classroom based programme suit your company's culture? Is there a strong culture of learning and development already or will you need to 'sell' the benefits of ongoing development to get the buy-in you need?

**Delivery schedule.** Is there a requirement for ongoing micro-modules of training delivered in 'bite-sized' chunks to suit those workers with either very heavy project workloads or limited attention spans? How can a course be adapted to suit busy lifestyles?

**Technophobes vs technophiles.** Will those attending the course be accustomed to e-learning or will they need an initial familiarisation workshop to be able to get the most from their courses? Again, how will delivery of a 'paperless' course using virtual media fit in with the way the company uses technology as a whole? Will attendees need additional tools or connectivity?

## CASE STUDY

# A competency assessment framework to underpin individual training at Centrica Energy Upstream

**We are moving to a place in the world where PM is recognised as a skill and discipline in its own right, it is multifaceted and to assure delivery of large scale spend portfolios or significantly complex projects requires people with very good experience and knowledge of all facets of PM, not just engineering skills.**

**Marshall Allerton, Projects & Wells Director – Centrica Energy Upstream**

### The story so far

Over a three year period, 20120 Business Insight has provided a wide range of project management consultancy services, professional competency assessments and training services to Centrica Energy's Upstream and Renewables divisions.

One of the outcomes of this ongoing working partnership has been the ability for Centrica Energy to identify existing levels of PM competence within the organisation and to support an ongoing programme of professional training and development for all project managers and related support staff.

### Developing PM Excellence

#### **Building a competency matrix and individualised training programmes**

In 2010, Centrica Energy Upstream engaged 20120 Business Insight to undertake a detailed competency assessment and subsequently create personalised training and development programme for its PM team. Compared to some parts of the Centric Energy group, the PM team within the Upstream division routinely manages highly complex projects involving multiple stakeholders, often with conflicting objectives.

In order to minimise the associated business risks, Centrica Energy wanted to ensure that all its project professionals and anyone else working in a projects environment had the knowledge and competency required to be successful and fully effective. Added to this, the level of risk involved with capital projects had increased considerably, which meant that inefficiency would prove very costly for the business.

Marshall Allerton, Projects & Wells Director – Centrica Energy Upstream commented, 'We recognised that the scale and complexity of our capital expenditure portfolio was growing rapidly and we were moving to multi billion pound projects as well as running multiple concurrent significant sized projects.'

An APM accredited training provider, 20I20 set about building a competency framework based on APM principles. This would give Centrica Energy Upstream a sound baseline from which to measure the PM capabilities of both current and future employees. It would also provide a way of creating a highly individualised training programme.

The APM competency measurement framework is one of the most exhaustive in terms of providing a true 360 degree assessment of capabilities and 20I20 is one of only a handful of training providers accredited to use it. The framework is very robust and designed to measure an individual's test score across a project management standard based on three primary domains – technical, behavioural and contextual – with each individual rated across 300 variables.

According to APM guidelines, contextual capability refers to the way an individual can perform in context of the business' operating environment; technical capability refers to the level of skill in the mechanical aspects of project management– cost control estimates, critical path analysis and planning; behavioural refers to interpersonal or team management capabilities and interactions with colleagues.

The APM methodology included an initial self assessment by participating individuals, followed by one to one interviews to verify the results of the self-assessment and produce an individually validated score. After agreeing the results with each participant, an appropriate training programme was designed to suit each individual's short and medium term career goals.

Upon completing the competency assessment, 3 main categories of training were identified and a development programme was created accordingly. Of the individuals assessed, 15% of the group were classified as support staff requiring an entry level understanding of PM terminology with a basic understanding of project structures and international standards. A further 15% comprised seasoned project managers who did not require professional PM training but needed to enhance 'softer skills' like leadership and negotiation. Finally, the remaining 70% of the Centrica Energy Upstream projects team were classified as 'PMs of the future' who had successfully managed projects in the past, but needed to build on their practical knowledge base in order to meet the challenges of the high-risk portfolios they would be managing in the future.

As experts in the energy industries, when developing the training programme, 20I20 were able to contextualise the Centrica Energy Upstream team's need to reflect upon existing business processes, which made the training programme more rounded and valid. 'I received very good feedback from the individuals who attended the PM courses, the company has excellent training and facilitation skills and the way they run their assessments is really very good,' said Mr Allerton.

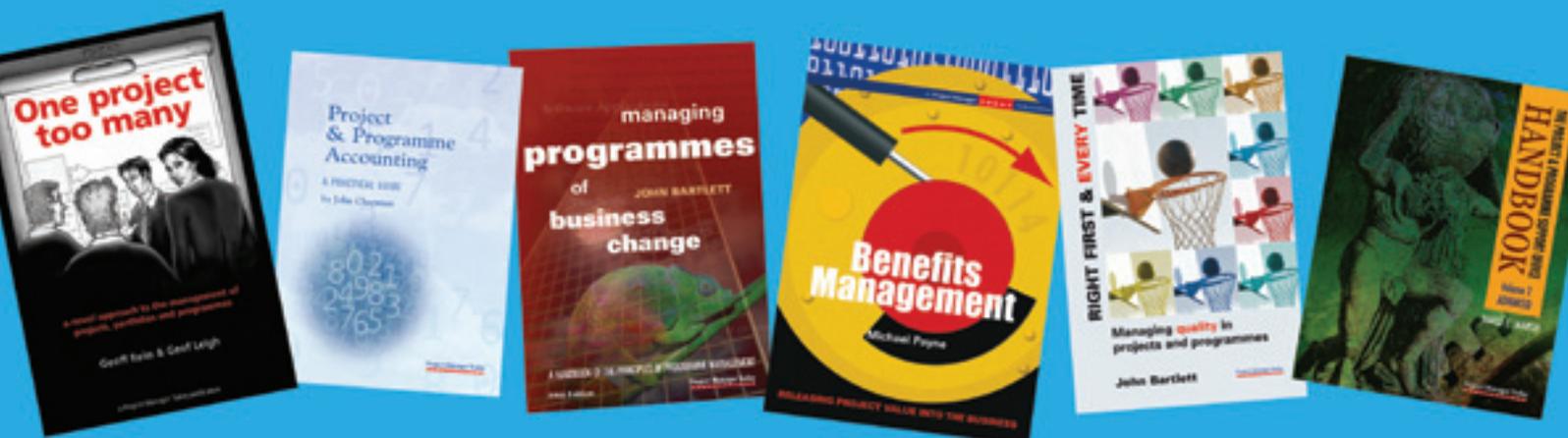
Looking ahead to the future, as the company moves forward and more people join the PM team, ensuring each individual develops a level of competence to match their job role.

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