

Migrating into Project Management – portable skills for a great future

Programme and Project Management practices contribute to the successful delivery of change across the NHS. A Portfolio, Programme and Project Management improvement initiative is being carried out within the NHS to help develop and promote skills, knowledge and experience in these areas.

Ask a project manager how long they have been in project management and you will generally be greeted by a short pause. The question is not always as straightforward as it sounds, as many project managers move across to this discipline from another specialism. Whilst increasing numbers of undergraduates study project management and move straight into the profession, it is still very common for project managers to start off in a different discipline. Partly, of course, because it is a profession that uses skills that can be very effectively migrated from other roles and then consolidated within a project management career.

Such was the case for Andrew Dangerfield, who moved across to project management from a 15 year career as a nurse. After just eight years in project management, Andrew became Head of Project and Programme Management, within the Strategy, Policy and Programmes Team of NHS Leeds.

Whilst Andrew values his clinical background, he is insistent that “you don’t need to be a subject expert to be a good project manager. Project management is about process, and if the process is working correctly, then the clinical knowledge should be contributed by the key stakeholders or members of the project board.” The skills that Andrew brought into project management from nursing were based on his firm conviction that difficult tasks can always be achieved, if they are approached step by step and if all parties involved support the process and are actively involved.

Many project management skills can be developed in other careers

Andrew believes that a good project manager should:

- Have excellent negotiating skills to manage the concerns of all the different groups affected by a project
- Understand a systematic approach to change
- Be prepared to be innovative
- Lead with conviction and attract support for projects
- Be self reflective - what went well and what could be improved?
- Deliver scheduled results.

"These skills are very transferable," he muses, "some people come into project management with a high level of skill in each, and others develop them during their project management career." For Andrew, "communication skills are key. But, like everything in project management, communication has to be approached in a systematic way to be most effective. This is where frameworks and methodologies can be most helpful."

Andrew is a PRINCE2® practitioner and values the framework that the PRINCE2 method provides. He said: "all projects should follow a set lifecycle from the initial project mandate and start up, to managing delivery and closing down. PRINCE2 offers a series of processes which cover all the activities needed for each phase of a project. It is important to understand which actions are most appropriate at each point of the lifecycle, but the framework can be used best when it is modified to suit a set of circumstances. The PRINCE2 structure will trigger the right questions, but is no replacement for the project manager's thinking and creativity."

"It's not enough to just follow the process, real life isn't like that. Anything that involves human beings cannot be relied upon to follow a fixed process. There are other factors involved; factors that project managers need to understand. Many of the people that can affect a project's chances of success don't report directly to the project manager, so understanding and taking account of other people's point of view can be critical. Likewise, negotiation and influencing skills can be really important. Matrix working is key to ensuring delivery."

Results that make life better

Projects are about the benefits that they deliver. In the NHS, project management is about delivering benefits that make people's lives better. For project managers, the real thrill is in 'making things happen'; overcoming obstacles and pulling teams together to target a common aim. "Whether the project is to install a new booking system, or enhancing care facilities in hospitals or communities, there is always a magic moment," Andrew confirms, "The moment when you see the doubt lift from people, as they realise that the target has been achieved and that the change has made life better."



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