Hiring a Programme Manager:

Does the Managing Successful Programmes qualification make a difference?

By Melanie Franklin, CEO, Maven Training

In this article Melanie explains why candidates with an MSP® qualification could have the upper hand when it comes to the recruitment process.

Hiring a senior project manager

Earlier this month I was part of an interview panel looking for a new senior project manager to run a programme of 8 projects and workstreams to deliver system and process change over the next 18 months.

This is the story of one candidate who should have been our automatic choice….but who will not be offered the job.

Candidate details

On paper the candidate has an excellent track record of success in similar types of project and programme situations and has the advantage of experience in the industry for which we were hiring. As with the other applicants we asked this candidate to talk us through their approach to establishing the programme, managing it day to day and key activities to close the programme effectively.

Forming the programme

The candidate gave a good account of how they assembled all of the information about the programme to form a strong picture of the scope, expected deliverables and driving forces.

He spoke compellingly about how they established and managed their relationships with the project managers and how they ensured they kept up to date with project progress and were able to advise and guide the project managers when they hit difficulties.

He described in detail how he formed his programme plan and how he used this to scope the requirements for each of the projects. Clearly the candidate had a lot of experience in this area and he gave detailed answers about his ability to structure and manage all of the project and programme activities.

What about benefits?

So far so good, but I was aware that the words 'scope' and 'deliverables' and 'objectives' had been used a great deal but there had been no mention of benefits so I asked for more details on his benefits management approach.

When prompted the candidate clearly knew that benefits were important but he seemed to be less sure of the process and made no mention of any of the techniques from Managing Successful Programmes that have now become best practice.

I am not expecting a candidate to give me a detailed description of every heading in a Benefits Profile but I am looking for the successful candidate to follow a structured approach to identifying the benefits including understanding what the disbenefits are i.e. who might be disadvantaged by the programme.

He did not formally track the achievement of any benefits during the programme, assuming that this should be taken care of at a post programme review and I am sure that his lack of understanding of benefits management and therefore, his lack of knowledge about a Benefits Realization Plan contributed to this view.

Which stakeholders experience which benefits?

As the candidate did not analyze benefits and disbenefits, this led me to question his approach to managing stakeholders. I was wary of anyone not identifying the winners and the losers on the programme because this lack of understanding surely impacts on who it is most important to build relationships with.

The candidate talked about the importance of regular communication, but there was too little substance to his approach.

Analyzing stakeholders

The candidate did review his stakeholders for their impact on the programme and their influence over it, but the key things that were missing for me were a lack of analysis about their specific interests. Without an understanding of how their work would be impacted by the changes brought about by the programme it was not possible to define if they were recipients of benefits or disbenefits and there was no analysis of the type of communication they would most engage with and no creation of a communications plan that included different media and different messages according to the needs of the stakeholder.

What are you communicating?

When pushed to explain more about how and what they communicated the candidate gave a detailed breakdown of the progress reporting they would acquire from each of the projects and how they would collate this into regular communications. Again, that sounds good until you realize that telling stakeholders how busy the project teams are, and what activities they are doing does not win 'hearts and minds'. Without information about the benefits that the programme is on course to deliver (which requires you to track the benefits as part of your benefits management process) then you cannot persuade stakeholders that the programme is relevant or helpful to them in achieving their objectives.

Heroic endeavour is not enough!

One of my friends who is an experienced programme manager believes that programme success relies on 'heroic endeavour' to achieve the objectives and deliver benefits.

This heroism is the ability to keep going and keep motivating others in the face of immense challenges. However, he also believes that heroic endeavour is not enough – that without a strong process to back you up there is too much reliance on luck to get the job done.

This interview really showed the need for candidates not only to have the experience of running projects and programmes but also that they have a framework for how they run them. Best practice processes and techniques embodied in PRINCE2®, Managing Successful Programmes® and Management of Portfolios® provide you with the essential building blocks for structuring your work and give those you work with the confidence that you know what you are doing.

And the winner is....

This candidate was up against others with similar track records but the successful candidate was the person who was able to explain in detail how they defined, planned, managed and tracked the results of their programme and its projects. The interview panel had no hesitation in awarding the role to this person because we knew that there would be a solid audit trail of who was doing what, what was being achieved and how problems were going to be overcome.

About Maven Training - the Portfolio, Programme, Project, Risk and Change Management specialist

Maven builds capability by giving its clients the knowledge and skills to realise the benefits of organizational change through the delivery of practical and workable solutions that can be applied to all new programme, project and change initiatives. Our mission is to transfer our skills and experience and to build self-sufficiency and confidence in our clients.

Services offered by Maven include portfolio definition and project prioritization, methodology creation and customization, maturity assessments, health checks and competency assessments - all delivered by expert practitioners.

These services are supported by a comprehensive project management training curriculum with courses accredited by all of the major professional organizations including APMG-International, by our 'Being Effective' range which focuses on key skills required to drive change and by a wealth of supporting materials providing thought leadership and guidance.

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About MSP®

MSP is the global de facto standard for programme management. The methodology was developed by the UK government to help organizations deliver successful long term programs which deliver strategic change. It defines Programme Management as 'the co-ordinated organization, direction and implementation of a portfolio of projects and activities that together achieve outcomes and realize benefits that are of strategic importance.'

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