

**Career growth: from entrepreneur to project manager  
or: from project manager to entrepreneur**  
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In principle entrepreneurs have been viewed as those people who are ready to put everything on the line in order to make their company work "success at all costs". Project managers have felt stuck in the role and often battle to progress to alternative careers. This paper explores the career opportunities for both the entrepreneur and the project manager. It proposes possibilities for project managers to advance to the position of chief executive officer and for the entrepreneur to bring entrepreneurial skill to learning organisations. Recent research and current articles are reviewed and the career outlook for both the project manager and the entrepreneur is explored

*Key phrases: career growth, entrepreneurship, project entrepreneurship, project management*

## INTRODUCTION

Personal growth and career growth may often not go hand-in-hand. Defining how someone's career may change is often dependent on personal circumstances, as opposed to typical career path planning. According to Robbins (1998:562) management's role in career development has undergone significant changes in recent years. It has gone from paternalism in which the organisation took responsibility for managing its employees' careers, to supporting individuals as they take personal responsibility for their future. For much of the twentieth century, companies recruited young workers with the intent that they would spend their entire career inside that single organisation. For those with the right credentials and motivation, they created promotion paths dotted with ever increasing responsibility. Employers would provide the training and opportunities, and employees would respond by demonstrating loyalty and hard work.

Now, for most organisations, this formalised, employer-directed programme of career planning has been discarded. It has been replaced by self-directed careers. The new contract between employers and employees transfers responsibility for career development from the organisation to the employee. So today's employees are becoming more concerned than ever with keeping their skills, abilities, and knowledge current and preparing for tomorrow's new tasks. They are beginning to see learning as a lifelong process. Increasingly, today's employees are balancing current work responsibilities with taking courses during their off hours. In the same way that total quality management emphasises continuous improvement, self-directed careers require continuous training and learning.

Employers do not seem to want to invest in expensive career planning programmes for short-term employees. Employees are not motivated to learn organisation-specific skills that may not be compatible with the skills needed by other organisations. Additionally, bureaucracies were designed to carve out

well-defined career paths for their members. They created narrow, functional specialists located in a multi-layered hierarchy. As bureaucracies they have been dismantled and were often replaced by cross-functional teams, flat structures, and outsourced activities, so also to have career-planning programmes.

Entrepreneurs becoming project managers may appear less common than project managers becoming entrepreneurs, but what is evident is that career shifting and growth from one platform to another is ongoing. This paper intends to explore possible career benefits for a project manager, as well as the opportunities for entrepreneurs in project organisations and the initiative value they may bring.

### **CAREER BENEFITS FOR PROJECT MANAGERS**

Logue (2005:26) reports that in March 2005, Sasol, a South African chemicals and fuel products company listed on both the Johannesburg and New York stock exchanges, announced that its current chief executive officer (CEO) would retire in July of that year. His replacement joined the company in 1975 and served as project manager on the company's Mozambiquan Natural Gas Project from inception to completion. He used that expertise to manage the globalisation of the company's gas to liquids technology. In July 2005, Sasol itself is the entity he must manage.

According to Logue (2005:26) there are not many project managers in executive ranks, but some are working their way up. Just as projects need managers, companies need leaders. Someone must ensure that strategic goals are targeted and accomplished. If projects are strategically essential to an organisation, it would make sense that the CEO would be a logical destination on a project manager's career path. Yet, it is uncommon to hear about project managers who reach the top of their organisations. Because of their ability to meet objectives systematically and consistently, project managers may make the best executives - their hands-on execution skills can translate to big-picture prowess.

It is possible for project management practitioners to overcome misconceptions of the profession, acquire the needed leadership skills and combine them with their existing expertise to make waves organisation wide. Project management skills are also quoted as being important to the course of running any business.

While it may seem logical that project management skills are in essence leadership skills, to many people project management is a merely a tool and not a profession. Seasoned CEOs have 20 or 30 years of corporate experience behind them. In addition, executive positions require leaders to think strategically over the long term, while project managers are expected to focus on shorter-term deliverables. Logue's article shows a possible career progression for project managers and illustrates common skill sets for project managers and executive leadership, as seen in Figure 1.

In terms of the matrix (figure 1) it is evident that leadership skills contained in the CEO responsibilities are similarly contained in project management activity. These similarities create an experience vantage point from which career growth can be launched.

**Figure 1 Project management skill sets for cross-functional CEOs**

<b>Leadership Skill</b>	<b>CEO Responsibilities</b>	<b>Project Management equivalent</b>
<b>Selling Up</b>	Board and shareholder relations	Winning stakeholder Buy-in
<b>Selling Down</b>	The entire firm and its customers	The Project Team
<b>People Skills</b>	Creating followers	Earning respect
<b>Strategic Planning</b>	Big-Picture, long term vision for the organisation	Project scope planning and definition
<b>Finance</b>	High level budget and funding skills	Project resource planning and cost control
<b>Marketing</b>	Product management, public relations and advanced promotion skills.	Project vision statements, Communications planning

Source: Logue (2005:28)

With many common skill sets recognised between project managers and entrepreneurs, it is evident that management of business start-ups through entrepreneurial action is a possible career opportunity for project managers looking to make use of their skills.

## **ENTREPRENEURS IN PROJECT ORGANISATIONS**

Conversely, previous entrepreneurs operating in project organisations may have a lot to offer. According to Jevnaker (1993:335) entrepreneurial management systems can be implemented in existing mature companies. Based on a case study in a Norwegian corporation, her paper analyses the development of a supportive sub-organisation for innovation and new ventures. The facilitation of internal entrepreneurship is discussed in terms of an entrepreneurial project.

The focus of her paper is on how a new social system for stimulating innovation and internal venturing is created and implemented in large and "mechanistic" corporations. Introducing a radically new system

with new strategy, methods and routines, may be seen as an innovative change by itself. Jevnaker (1993:335) quotes Burgelman and Sayles stating that 'big business' usually has 'big problems' in fostering innovations and new ventures, particularly when the innovative effort stems from the "grassroots". Even if a corporation decides to go for an innovative change, it may be hard to implement. The purpose of her paper was to develop some tentative propositions about the creation of entrepreneurial management systems through an in-depth understanding of a large corporation.

In answering the question of this understanding one must ascertain the extent to which entrepreneurs themselves may be influential in change and in identifying driving forces behind innovations in large corporations. An interesting question is whether corporations could possibly speed up those driving forces and create more entrepreneurial environments in order to realise new opportunities. From a strategic management perspective, the problem is how corporate management can improve its capacity to deal with autonomous strategic behaviour. An entrepreneurial business perspective would suggest that the problem is how to make a legitimate and good road for entrepreneurial venturing inside large corporations. An official, entrepreneurial management system may be one possible route, as well as the possible advancement of previous entrepreneurs.

According to Jevnaker (1993:336), sufficiently sensitive and versatile managerial practices are not easily 'installed' overnight in a well-established hierarchic organisation. Her paper analyses the development effort inside one corporation from two perspectives; a) a programme implementation perspective and b) an entrepreneurial management perspective.

The *implementation perspective* focuses on what happens (or does not happen) after some new policy or strategy is agreed upon. The *entrepreneurial management perspective* is a complementary perspective: to 'see' why radically new efforts may evolve despite many implementation barriers in large corporations.

These perspectives highlight the critical factors and driving forces in how a corporation goes about implanting a new innovation-breeding strategy. Finally it is argued that entrepreneurial activity may be necessary for successful implementation of a strategy or programme which is new and unfinished in a bureaucratic corporation. Entrepreneurship may be defined as a process by which individuals - either on their own or inside organisations - pursue opportunities without regard to the resources they currently control. It is regarded as typical for the entrepreneur/intrapreneur 'to find a way'.

The idea that entrepreneurs may improve or add to the risk aversion of a firm is not a new one. Corbetta *et al.* (2004:99) describe entrepreneurial behaviour in family firms: "The unique ownership and governance systems, structures, strategies, and organizational cultures that pervade family firms are depicted as having mixed effects on these firms' ability to innovate, take risks and proactively pursue entrepreneurial opportunities."

Some authors are convinced that direct involvement of owner-family members in daily business activities as well as in strategic decisions frequently results in the long-term commitment of the firm to continued entrepreneurial behaviour. Moreover, the substantial identification of ownership and management often characterising family firms usually results in reduced agency problems and consequent increased managerial dynamism (Gomez-Mejia *et al.* 2001:81; Habbershon & Williams 1999:1).

Corbetta *et al.* (2004:99) state that given the crucial importance of entrepreneurial activities in determining the intergenerational viability of family firms, the contrast between these two perspectives on entrepreneurial capabilities in family firms should be addressed. In particular, a clearer picture of the antecedents of entrepreneurial behaviour in family firms should be drawn. There is a strong need to understand more clearly what family-related factors and what governance, organizational and strategic variables enable or hinder entrepreneurship in these firms.

Ravasi *et al.* (2004:166) review the contextual conditions that affect the learning process that underlies entrepreneurial innovation, as entrepreneurs move from an initial intuition to a well-developed new product or service. This is what we refer to as "entrepreneurial learning". We acknowledge that other important learning processes occur, for instance, as entrepreneurs learn "how to be entrepreneurial" (Minniti & Bygrave 2001:5) or as they start exploiting their innovations, managing growth and building an organisation.

However, Ravasi *et al.* (2004:166) believe that the specific type of learning that underlies and sustains the development of a new way of connecting resources, technologies and needs in a value-generating way is a distinctive feature of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial innovation is about discovering and exploiting opportunities for new valuable combinations of resources that lead to the introduction of new products or services, new production processes or new ways to serve the market.

Learning in an entrepreneurial venture, therefore, resembles more what has been termed higher-level, generative learning, as opposed to lower level, adaptive learning. Adaptive learning involves the development of behavioural routines that allow an organisation to perform a repetitive task in an increasingly efficient and effective way. Indeed, a balanced combination of generative and adaptive learning is required to support long-term growth, as the exploitation of commercially successful new ideas provides the resources to support new exploration.

However, the exploration of new combinations of resources is a qualifying feature of entrepreneurial action. Learning in an entrepreneurial venture has a creative component that goes beyond repetition and incremental optimisation; it occurs in ambiguous contexts and often involves the development of completely new solutions or radically innovative products. Successful entrepreneurial innovation

requires an increasing understanding of contexts of use and functional implications of alternative solutions.

As we understand it, entrepreneurial learning takes place as entrepreneurs gradually manage to make sense of the connections between the different technical subsystems, product functions, customers' preferences, market structure, and the like, and reduce the degree of ambiguity associated to the external environment.

In developing new and radical solutions to business problems we find the entrepreneur entrenched in large organisations projects. Thus the development from entrepreneur to internal organisation project manager seems a likely opportunity for entrepreneurial skill.

## CLOSURE

The title of this paper implies a question (to develop a career path from a project manager to an entrepreneur or from an entrepreneur to a project manager). This paper reports on both answers to the question by offering possibilities on both.

- Logue's article reports on an example of career advancement for project managers to CEOs, implying that project managers possess the skills necessary to run a business, even their own.
- Conversely multiple authors cite research papers and findings to indicate that organisations, particularly (learning project organisations), have requirements for entrepreneurial spirit and commercially successful new ideas. These ideas and learning are believed to be engendered into an organisation with entrepreneurial skills. The entrepreneurs capable of delivering on these ideas are proposed as intra-organisational project managers.

Both alternatives seem to leave the project manager and the entrepreneur with career opportunities outside of their contemporary comfort zones, but with expanded opportunity.

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