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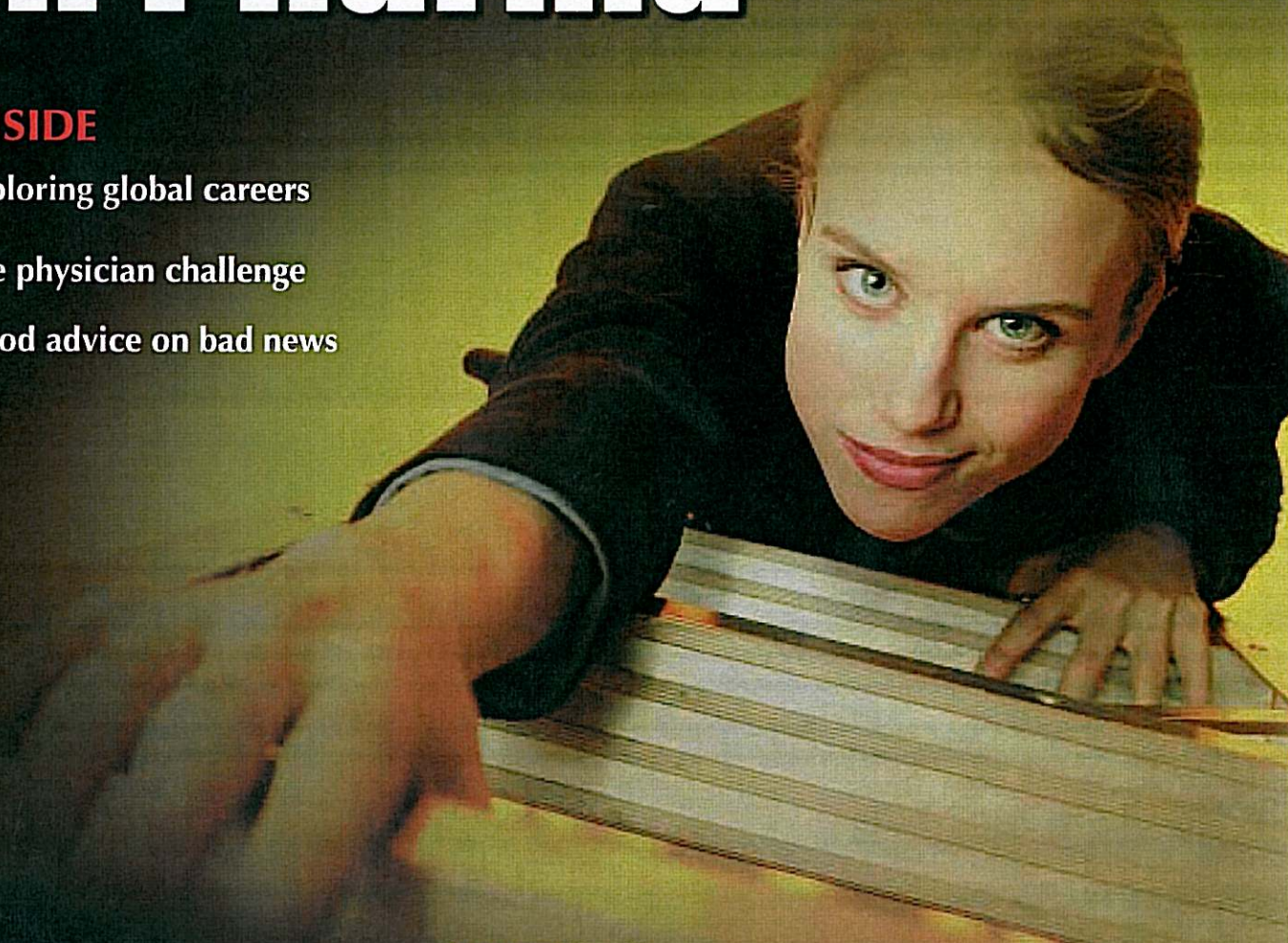
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Who would want to be a project manager?

Geoffrey Saunders explores the role of the project manager in pharma and gives some tips for success in this complex discipline

Some say that project management has been around since the building of the pyramids, but in reality, as a recognised discipline it's much more recent. It has its origins in large-scale projects, some military, some engineering, but appreciation of it as an important discipline in pharmaceutical development began only 20 or so years ago.

In the business of pharma there are numerous opportunities and strategies available and many ways to use scarce resources (including money). Somewhere, somebody looked at what was needed to manage these variables and realised that the tools and methods of project management could clarify the available options and choices to be made. This shift was welcomed by an industry that was facing increasingly complex decisions and suddenly project management was 'hot' in pharma.

So, if you venture into project management in pharma today, what should you expect and what will be expected of you?

The project manager's role

One of my favourite quotes is: "Project management concerns far more people than just project managers." In truth, it's a way of doing business, not a role undertaken by just one person. All contributors to a project should know the components and parameters of the project. However, the people involved have varying roles. Some include functional tasks, some management tasks.

Perceptions vary when it comes to both the tasks that should be involved in the project manager's role and the importance of that role. To some people, all management is the 'boring bit' and is for the project manager alone. Some perceive the project manager to get in the way of the 'real' work, of discovery and development. Others expect the project manager to be some kind of miracle worker who can solve

all of a project's problems no matter what. Clearly, if the person in role is to be effective, a business should determine what it expects from a project manager and what it expects from the process of project management. Hopefully this understanding will then be shared with the person concerned and the rest of the organisation. Is this too much to hope for? Unfortunately, experience tells me that it can be.

Given the above, who would make the career choice to be a project manager in pharma? Some choose, some are chosen, some merely find themselves in the role by default. Let's be optimistic for a while and assume that you are actively considering a career in project management and that your organisation understands project management and rewards it appropriately. What are the tools that will help you in this role?

The importance of process

A successful pharmaceutical organisation needs a number of project management processes. One important one is a well understood process by which investment decisions are taken and then monitored. Such a decision-making process constitutes a basic project management process. (And, in this example, each phase of the project can be considered as a separate project in its own right.) Such a process must be able to answer some simple questions;

Q. What do we want?

Before spending serious money clarify what you are trying to do – and ensure everyone agrees!

Q. How can we get it?

This is where the planning comes in. And planning costs money (but not on the scale of what is to come). Planning must be detailed and thorough so that you and your organisation are convinced that the rest

of the project will work. Again, ensure the plan is agreed.

Q. Who needs to know what we are going to do?

This list will include a number of stakeholders, from those with a vague interest through to those from whom you will expect a serious commitment to the project. Naturally, those who will be performing the work (and their line managers) come into the latter category and you will need their continuing support through the life of the project.

Q. What do we do now?

Once work is underway, you must continue to work towards the agreed end point. Frequently, this is described as 'monitoring progress'. In fact it is much more. Monitoring will only tell what has happened but as a project manager you need to work out what should happen from this point on and use your influence to make sure it does. Your plan needs to be adaptable and you must adjust it as necessary to achieve the agreed end.

Q. How well did we do?

As you bring your project work to a conclusion, (though in fact you must remember this throughout your work) you should remember that your organisation advances by completing a succession of (mainly) successful projects and by learning from each one. That learning must be applied to future projects. It will encompass functional lessons and management lessons.

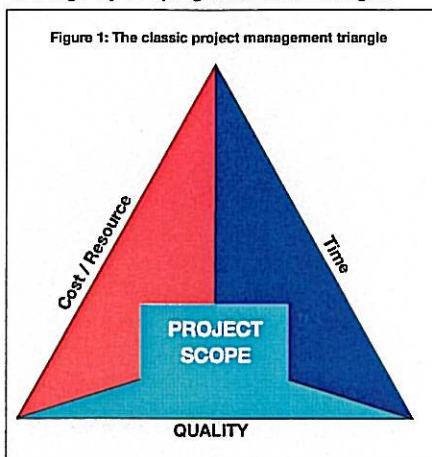
Ideally, all the possible investment decisions that a company makes should employ this type of process. Collecting the results together is called 'portfolio management' and effective portfolio management depends on continuity throughout the business. If this sounds obvious, that's because it is! But like common sense the obvious is rarely that common.

Such processes are practical tools for effective project management. However, the project manager also needs a strategic understanding of the factors at play in the discipline. This dynamic can be illustrated by some simple models.

The project management triangle

There are many variations on this model – often called the ‘iron triangle’ or ‘triple constraint’ – but they all come down to the same thing (see Figure 1). In addition, they all require everyone who recognises the model to agree what it means! On its own it tells you very little.

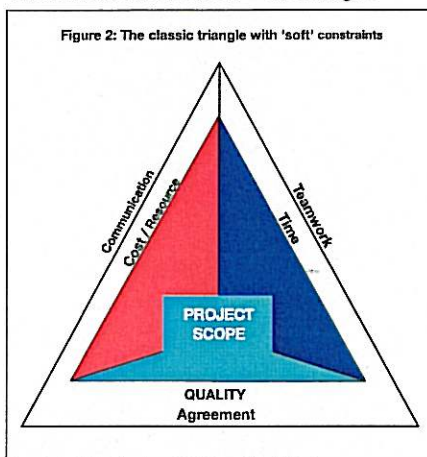
A common misconception about this model is that it implies the project manager’s job is to ‘deliver within the constraints’ or ‘manage by keeping inside the triangle’.



This is not the case. What it highlights is the agreement and planning required for successful project management. You must come up with a plan that can deliver the project scope, to the required quality, within the necessary timeframe and using the available resources (including money). You must then reach agreement with the stakeholders, ensuring they support that plan. And if they (or you) wish to make changes, either before agreement, or after, you must be ready and able to show the impact of the proposed changes before confirming them. The classic pitfall of project management is to implement

changes without a full understanding of their impact on all ‘sides of the triangle’. The Project Management Institute asserts that 90% of a project manager’s time is spent on communication. So my suggestion is to wrap around the classic project management triangle a set of (soft) constraints, which give a different perspective to the project (see Figure 2). This is important because it can be tempting to focus on plans, budgets and deadlines and ignore the ‘big picture’. The wraparound constraints remind us of the context in which projects take place and recognise that development of valuable human assets is key to project management success.

Respecting the human element to a project – the agreement, communication and teamwork involved – encourages



commitment from all. Neglect these things and you can expect the opposite.

Remember, it is ultimately people that work on projects so managing projects is managing people. The very best project management tools will not deliver successful projects if the team is not motivated and committed. I have seen great project management that used only the simplest of tools, while I have also seen awful examples where the most lavish tools available were employed.

Always remember the impact on people of any decision you make and, where

possible, allow team members to contribute to your decision-making. For example, when developing the project plan make sure that team members contribute to that process so the plan becomes the team’s plan. Indeed, the planning process can actually help ‘build’ the team. On the other hand, if you present your plan as a ‘fait accompli’, you can stoke resentment in your team members. Once the project is underway, if problems arise use them as an opportunity to develop your team’s problem solving abilities. In addition, make sure team members are involved with communicating to stakeholders on a project’s progress, helping instil a feeling of ‘ownership’ in the group.

Keys to success

As a project manager you will often be asked by your company: “How’s it going?” What is really meant is: “Can you assure me that the work for which you are responsible will be completed as we agreed?” An honest answer is all that is required (indeed no one can expect every project to succeed) but you can only give an honest answer if you believe in what you are saying. You will only believe in what you are saying if you have complete confidence in your project management processes and models and the people in your team.

Perhaps the most confident project managers are those with the support of an employer that truly understands the role. Another quote: “Successful project managers work for successful project management organisations.” If you are confident that your company is one that understands the role of the project manager you can expect a rewarding career in this discipline. Perhaps most significantly for pharma, as a project manager you will gain a far wider perspective on the exciting drug development process than you would get working within a more specific function.

Geoffrey Saunders, a project manager for more than 20 years, is an instructor with international training firm ESI International.



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