Project Management Institute Luxembourg
"What's in the queue for our future Project Managers?" -
Lessons learned from performing projects with IT students

On Thursday September 27 2007, PMI B PMI Belgium Chapter - Luxembourg Section hosted a presentation by Professor Adrian Müller of the University of Applied Sciences Kaiserslautern, describing his experiences of projects conducted by his students. Students are taught Project Management in the fourth semester of their studies.

His presentation covered a review of the mindset of the current youth generation, how they approached the tasks of project management on their course projects, and his own observations.

The mindset of modern youth differs notably from that of earlier generations. Drawing from the survey "Circuits of cool" conducted jointly by MTV and Microsoft in 2007, he showed how the needs of youth, as expressed by means of Maslow's Needs Hierarchy, have changed compared to the corresponding survey of 1987. At all levels of the hierarchy - basic, safety, social, esteem, self-expression - the means of satisfying those needs are now met by technology, such as podcasts, blogs, on-line communities, e-mail, mobile and internet, underlining the impact of the communications explosion. Attitudes have also changed, in aspirations and their attitude to employment and employers, and towards risk.

Professor Müller discussed the course warm-up projects that he sets his students, for example using a basic set of resources to drop an egg without breaking it, or to build a tower to support a small load, and described the lessons learned by the students from these ostensibly simple projects, including:

- Around 50% of warm-up projects fail (noting that this drops to less than 10% in the subsequent "real" projects that they undertake.
- They learn to grant more authority to the Project Manager, and that the Project Manager should not work directly on issues, but delegate tasks.
- The responsibilities assigned to any role must be maintained.
- Information gathering is important, and required information should be acquired early and fast.

The later "real" projects are more substantial, with a budget of around 100 person-hours and a duration of about three months. These projects are more concrete; the students must provide more formal deliverables, for example a project charter and a project plan. Moreover, here the students themselves define the scope, and a sizeable majority opt for projects in consulting or web programming.

Professor Müller's observations on these projects include:

- Student motivation grows and declines fast.
- Project teams typically are formed very quickly.
- Communication is the most discussed aspect in team charters, but the forms requiring a more 'physical' contact - presenting and oral communication - are disliked.
- Conflict resolution mostly tends toward consensus and related forms of resolution.
- In a similar vein, a less confrontational approach is seen in team management - weak team members tend to be protected, and when problems arise, blame attribution (finger pointing) is rare.

- Post-mortem analyses of projects are disliked.

From the students' side, their own lessons learned from the real projects include:

- Planning needs more time and estimates should less optimistic.
- The project charter must avoid ambiguities.
- Risk assessment should be better conducted, using formal techniques.
- As in the warm-up projects, roles and responsibilities should be defined and respected.
- Motivation declines over time.
- Meetings need strict rules and should be shorter, and participants should be informed in advance!
- Change management should be controlled and supported by a tool, such as CVS.
- The PM should apply their authority, should have a back-up available, and should resolve inter-team conflicts.
- In terms of communication with clients, it should be better, regular and more formal.

Professor Müller's conclusions are that:

- European youth culture is heavily influenced by the "communication explosion".
- Youth mindset is dominated by opportunity overload and high expectations.
- Young IT students are team-oriented, tend to be short-term motivated, and are amazingly highly networked.
- But at the end of the day, IT students are still IT students: logical thinking is preferred, presenting in public is a pain, and they are looking for innovative jobs in future oriented companies.

Dr. Müller is Professor for Information Retrieval at the University, and also offers courses for PMP and Microsoft Project. After graduation in Computer Science and research work in Information Retrieval, Dr. Müller worked with IBM on a number of projects including the Websphere Portal Server, before taking up his present position. He has been certified as a PMI Project Management Professional since 2001.