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FROM EXPERIMENT TO PERMANENT PROCEDURE – THE EXPERIENCES OF PROJECT MANAGER TRAINING AT LAUREA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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Abstract

Laurea University of Applied Sciences (hereafter: Laurea UAS), Finland, organized a project manager training program in 2016, called Laurea Certified Project Manager Training. This program is meant for professionals at Laurea UAS who are responsible for externally funded research and development (hereafter: R&D) projects. The idea for the program arose from the need to increase the competence of project management among Laurea UAS employees. At the moment, Laurea UAS is running approximately 80 externally funded projects, and starting in 2019 a larger number of employees will be involved in R&D projects.

The Laurea Certified Project Manager Training program started in 2016, and by the end of May 2019 around 60 participants has completed the training. The aim of the training is to help project managers better lead their projects, to clarify project management and to make the work of the project manager more compelling. At the moment, the training program consists of seven sessions, each focusing on different topics related to project management. The topics are: writing and filing of an application for external funding, project managers' role in projects, project finances, agile project management, sharing good practices, communication and marketing of projects, and integration of teaching and R&D projects. The core idea is to answer to the needs of project managers with ongoing training topics; therefore, topics can be changed in the future.

The Laurea Certified Project Manager Training program was developed at the wishes and according to the needs of the project managers at Laurea UAS. After three years of execution, it is time to re-evaluate the content of the training and examine whether the training has served the original purpose or if it needs to be changed. This research explores the experiences of the project managers who participated to the training between 2016 and 2019; five participants were interviewed. The aim of this research is to determine whether the participants found the training useful and if the training increased their competence in project management. In addition, the interviewees were asked if the topics of the training were relevant and, if not, what was missing or which topics could be left out. The interviewees were also asked if the participatory learning methods used in the training motivated them. At the end of the interview, the participants could offer ideas for how to further develop the training.

The results show that the experiences of the participants were positive. The level of commitment to the training was quite high, and the feedback was clear. The interviewees found the training relevant: it increased their expertise in project management and enabled them to tackle challenges typically faced in their roles as project managers. The interviewees also valued the chance to network with others and the fact that new project managers could benefit from their more experienced colleagues' cases. In conclusion, the training increased the quality of the project management work at Laurea UAS, and the training should continue in the future.

Keywords: Project management, research and development (R&D), training, competence development.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to the Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014) [1], universities of applied sciences carry out applied research and development and innovation activities that serve education, develop the region and promote industry, business and regional development. Universities of applied sciences are recognized as research and development partners, innovators, service providers and development platforms in national and international projects, and those projects offer modern learning and research environments to the students, teachers and other expertise within universities of applied science [2]. Furthermore, research and development work plays an important role in the strategy of Laurea UAS,

which is more related to regional development goals and to global funds and grants. In order to achieve its strategic targets, Laurea UAS has recognized five critical points of change, two of which are to increase and deepen the strategic regional, national and international network of partners and to increase effectiveness and competitive R&D funding [3]. Effectiveness and competitive R&D funding are related to ongoing R&D projects and, therefore, it is meaningful to develop employees' project management competence.

The larger number of projects means that more and more employees of a university of applied sciences take part in project activity and even as project managers. According to Savelsbergh, Havermans and Storm [4], the work of the project manager can be challenging. Firstly, many project managers do not only work as project managers but also fulfill responsibilities in their more permanent position for which they have gained education. Secondly, most project managers do not seek the role of project manager when they start their initial jobs: they are promoted to project manager at a later stage of their career, which might lead to a lack in formal project management training and, therefore, their project management competence is limited. Thirdly, few standardized project management tools and methods are available, which is why project managers usually use their own personal standards when creating good practices in project management. They also constantly have to adapt their way of working to the new requirements of a particular project.

The challenges mentioned above also form the reality of project management at Laurea UAS. Over the years, the number of externally funded R&D projects has increased and, therefore, more and more employees of Laurea are working as project managers. This means radical changes have occurred in the Laurea working culture when compared with the traditional working culture of higher education institutions. This development has expanded the original role of its employees and, for instance, many teachers nowadays work not only as pedagogues but also as project managers, regional developers and researchers. Further, according to Toivonen et al. [5], it is taken into account that project managers and workers need competence to be successful with R&D priorities, funding and the expectations of multiple stakeholders. R&D-related working life requires experts who have the ability to network and develop expertise in a changing world. Therefore, improving the project management competence of Laurea UAS staff is of utmost importance.

This research presents the Laurea Certified Project Manager Training program, which aims to help project managers better lead their projects, to clarify project management and to make the work of the project manager more compelling. This research re-evaluates the training after three years of execution and offers suggestions for future development.

1.1 Project management

Project management is often described as the planning, organization and control of a project, with the purpose of achieving project goals according to an agreed-upon schedule and budget. In order to remain competitive, organizations have to be efficient and able to execute rapid changes in project management, if needed. [6] Project management is inevitable in today's world. It should improve continuously through different types of various projects. Project management is not only a necessity for improvement but also for a field that is trying to improve itself. Investments in the project management field should be made, especially through the strengthening of the workforce and organization competence. [7]

Project work requires a versatile set of competencies because, according to Ahonen, Meristö, Ranta and Tuohimaa [8], the project manager is responsible for theoretical background knowledge as well as project design. Thomas and Mengel [9] state that the competencies required of a successful project manager are social skills and emotional intelligence, communication, understanding of organizational politics, and understanding of the importance of visions, values and beliefs. According to Redujkovic [7], the important elements of project management competence include elements of organization and project management methods, as well as tools and techniques. It is important to understand that the weight of these factors may vary, depending on the type of project and number of projects being managed within an organization. For instance, in organizations that manage many projects, organizational competence becomes vitally important but is not so important in organizations that concentrate on a relatively small number of parallel projects. [7]

Crawford [10] divides the essential competencies of project management into three categories: input, personal and output. Input competencies consist of the knowledge, abilities, experience, attitudes and behaviours that a person brings to work. Personal competencies include personality characteristics,

which indicate a person's ability to do the work. Output competencies refer to the skills necessary for fulfilling workplace practices according to the required standards.

Project managers can learn and develop new competencies through formal or informal learning. [4] Formal learning happens in a formally organized learning program or event executed by a teacher or trainer. [11] Formal learning in project management appears, for example, in training related to project management certification and in education with project management elements. [12] Informal learning is carried out in learning from collaboration with others and from personal experience and reflection, and it can be executed, for example, in mentoring, during perspective changing and in extra-occupational transfer. [13]

Competence development requires a flexible, learner-centric approach that reacts to existing business needs. [14] Today, workplace learning includes informal and practice-based activities and, therefore, a significant part of professional training occurs outside formal educational contexts; for example, mentorship programs, on-the-job training and online network knowledge exchanges. [14, 15] Brandi and Iannone [14] add that the most successful type of learning is short, job specific, in-house and learner centric.

1.2 Project management training at Laurea UAS

At Laurea UAS, the idea of an in-house program arose from the need to increase project management competence among Laurea UAS employees. More and more employees of Laurea UAS started to work in projects, thus creating the need for high-quality project management. Therefore, Laurea UAS organized the project manager training, called Laurea Certified Project Manager Training. This program is meant for professionals at Laurea UAS who are responsible for externally funded R&D projects. The aim of the training is to help Laurea UAS project managers better lead their projects, increase project management competence, clarify project management and make the work of project managers more compelling.

The first Laurea Certified Project Manager Training was piloted in 2016–2017, when around 40 participants – representing educated professionals as teachers and project experts – entered the program. In 2016–2017, the training program contained nine days of contact learning, each focusing on different topics related to project management.

The participants of the first training program gave feedback and defined their wishes for the content of the modules. The module teachers employed participatory methods and kept the learning atmosphere open to constant, reciprocal discussion. The training showed that workplace learning is complex but fruitful. The participants saw that the most important thing in the first project manager training program was networking with other colleagues involved in the projects. Most of them also thought that having constructive dialogues with others helped them to learn and to achieve personal learning goals. In conclusion, the results of the first competence development training were remarkable, having a marked impact on the quality of project management work at Laurea UAS. [16, 17]

At the moment, Laurea UAS is running approximately 80 externally funded projects, and starting in 2019 a steadily greater number of employees will somehow be involved in R&D projects. At the moment, the training program consists of seven sessions, each focusing on different topics related to project management. The topics of the training are:

- The role and principles of the project manager's work
- Agile project management
- Challenges and solutions in a project manager's daily life
- The project manager of one's dreams
- Finances in RDI projects
- Integration of teaching and R&D projects
- Marketing and communication toolkit

2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to re-evaluate the content of the Laurea Certified Project Manager Training and examine whether the training has served its original purpose or, if not, which parts need to be changed. This research explores the experiences of the project managers who participated in the

training between 2016 and 2018; five participants were interviewed. The aim of this research is to demonstrate whether the participants found the training useful and if the training increased their project management competence. In addition, the interviewees were asked if the training topics were relevant and, if not, what was missing or which topics could be left out. The interviewees were also asked if the participatory learning methods used in the training motivated them. At the end of the interviews, the participants could introduce their own ideas on how to further develop the training.

3 RESULTS

The results of this research show that the experiences of and feedback from the participants of the training were positive. All of the interviewees found the training relevant. It increased their expertise in project management and helped them to identify as project managers.

"The training was a positive experience for me, and it make me feel that I belong at Laurea."

3.1 Experiences of the Laurea Certified Project Manager Training

The training consisted of nine sessions, each concentrating on a different topic related to project management. From the interviewees' point of view, the most useful sessions in the training were those on finances and communication.

"I got a lot of useful information from the session on finances."

"Budgeting was very important."

"The session on communication was useful."

Two of the interviewees underlined the importance of the communication session during the training.

"I understood how relevant project communication is."

"I realised that I should consistently keep others informed about my project: at the beginning, during and after the project. Project communication is much more than research articles."

The results of the interviews pointed out that all interviewees valued the chance to network with colleagues who also work as project managers. All of the interviewees thought that the training helped them find connections with other project managers at Laurea UAS.

"The best part of the training was the discussions with peers."

"Most of the value came from the people and from seeing who the other project managers are and what do they do."

The interviewees also thought that new project managers could benefit from the cases of their more experienced colleagues.

"It was more about exchanging knowledge than gaining knowledge."

In addition, the interviewees noted that after the training, it has been easier to pinpoint the people responsible for certain tasks at Laurea.

"After the training, it has been easier for me to find help inside Laurea. Now I know more people. The names and faces are familiar."

While Laurea UAS is situated on six different campuses, staff members do not meet with colleagues often. Therefore, project manager training is one of the rare places where project managers can get to know their peers.

"The training is maybe the only platform where you can meet other project managers. The project managers need to have their own platform. If the training is the only platform for the project managers to meet, it should be compulsory for all project managers."

Two of the interviewees, however, mentioned that in the future it would be useful to find ways for different project teams within Laurea UAS to collaborate. Even though communication and connection between project managers have improved, quite little cooperation takes place between projects. Every project manager still runs his or her own project and does not know what the others are doing. If

collaboration and sharing of project results could be improved, resources could be saved and growth of competence boosted.

"In the training, you could share the tasks that Laurea is performing within projects. In many projects, we are doing the same things, and it would really be good to identify those areas. And in the training, it might be useful to be able to work on those content areas and not always discuss which problems we are having."

The interviews showed that the Laurea Certified Project Manager Training advanced the participants' comprehension of the project manager position at Laurea. Each organisation has its own project management procedures and, for example, IT and HR systems, so the interviewees found it useful to learn how projects are managed. All interviewees had worked as a project manager or project specialist in several projects inside and outside Laurea prior to the training, which meant they had good knowledge of general project management. The Laurea Certified Project Manager Training, however, was useful even for them, because the training improved their ability to work as a project manager at Laurea.

"In the training, I understood the whole Laurea process."

"Even though I was an experienced project manager, the training showed me specifically how to be a project manager at Laurea."

The interviewees were also asked if the participatory learning methods used in the training motivated them. The methods were received with positive attitude, but the lectures at the beginning of each session were considered more useful and informative.

"The working methods were ok, but I received more useful information from the lecture parts."

"The working method (lecture + workshop) was ok, but I found the lecture part more useful, because in workshop part we discussed things we already knew."

3.2 Things to be considered

Some interviewees mentioned topics not included in the training but that would be useful. Two interviewees noted that quite little time had been reserved for studying project management tools.

"Some tools were mentioned, but there was no time to investigate them further."

One of the interviewees argued that Laurea UAS does not have clear requirements or guidelines for project management tools that should be used. Therefore, each project manager chooses the tools that are most convenient and comfortable for them.

"For example, I could use one tool, but there are tools which others might be using and which are more efficient, and it could be helpful to have a common Laurea project management manual with quite technical details."

"It would be easier if you could find information somewhere about what the requirements are and available platforms and some kind of good practices in the organization."

As well, the issues of data protection and ethical compliance were absent from the training.

"Data protection and ethical compliance – we do that individually but we should have some kind of procedure."

One of the interviewees also mentioned that Laurea library services should be presented in the training.

"Information specialists should be presented."

Of the sessions, the interviewees did not find two of them so useful: agile project management and open science.

"I didn't get anything out of the session on agile project management. It was nice to hear about it, but it didn't benefit me at all."

"The session on open science was unnecessary for me, because my project is not a traditional research project. And I didn't understand it at all."

Furthermore, one of the interviewees mentioned that issues of human resources are irrelevant to training, because the project manager is only managing the project, not working as anyone's supervisor.

"As project manager, you have no control over human resources. You are not their boss, you are not their leader, you don't have any power, so it's teamwork. You cannot really talk about resources."

3.3 Future development

Even though the training was overall a positive experience for all interviewees, the participants underlined the importance of practical issues. Three interviewees said that some issues were processed on an abstract level, which meant that concrete and tangible examples and guidelines were missing in some sessions. This is an issue organizers should keep in mind in future trainings.

"I see value in practical things."

"The session on communication was useful, but once again it lacked concrete examples."

In the future, it would be important to clarify and strengthen the role of project managers at Laurea UAS. When a person starts working at Laurea UAS, he or she can start their Laurea career, for example, as a teacher. In the later stages of their Laurea career, he or she "rolls into" the projects and begins work as a project manager. At this point, it would be important for him or her to identify him- or herself not only as a teacher but also as a project manager. The project manager is usually the person in contact with the partners outside Laurea and, therefore, he maintains a certain status, which he or she should be fully aware of. As well, it is possible that at some point in their Laurea career, the person would be working full time as a project manager and, therefore, it is important for them to be able to identify themselves as a project manager.

The project manager has a lot of responsibilities in the project: finances, results, collaboration, partnerships, etc. In future training sessions, it would be useful to process and discuss the project managers' experiences when it comes to the topic of responsibility, so that each project manager can better understand what is expected of them.

"The project managers should fully understand that Laurea's financial department is not responsible for the finances of a project, but the project manager is."

One of the responsibilities is to ensure that the project proceeds as planned and all the team members are doing their work as agreed. Some of the project managers find this task uncomfortable, especially in a situation where the project team members (colleagues) are not doing their work and the project manager has to remind them about it. Therefore, it would be helpful if the training could offer tools and strategies for these kinds of situations.

Even though the importance of communication was recognized in the training, implementation is still quite difficult, according to the interviewees. They do not have a clear picture of the communication tasks they should be performing by themselves and the ones for which they can request help from Laurea UAS's marketing and communications department.

"I have no idea whom I could contact when I need help with marketing or communications."

"I don't know if I can use the services of Laurea's marketing department in projects."

To be able to facilitate the work of all parties, it would be useful to list the communication tasks in the projects and name the persons who can deliver on each task, either within the project team or Laurea's marketing department. This procedure would help project managers communicate more efficiently about the projects.

Two of the interviewees wished that in the future, the training would employ a systematic approach and a clear path and structure. A clear training path with literature and assignments would guarantee the quality of the training, and the certificate would have higher value outside of Laurea UAS. Through a more official training path, the organization could expect participants to share a certain type of knowledge and master project management.

"I feel that there is no structure, because there are certified project manager trainings with specific topics, but it's not training without having a path."

“If we have our own culture of project managers, it makes it so much easier for us to work, and you know what to expect from others.”

One of the interviewees mentions that instead of utilizing a problem-oriented approach in the training, Laurea UAS should apply an opportunity-based approach. This way Laurea UAS could encourage the staff to become project managers.

“We start the training with assumptions that there is a problem. Sometimes I really feel that [the project] is a huge mess and a problem, but sometimes I actually would like to hear positive examples and things that work. Then you wouldn’t see the project management so hard at work with a lot of problems.”

The project manager training lasts for one academic year. However, participants have expressed their wishes for continuation, especially with networking. Thus, in the time since the official training, so-called coffee meet-ups have been organized once a month. At these events, the project managers can meet with their peers, discuss their projects, share good practices and get tips; for example, how to find project partners for a new project. These events have earned positive feedback.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research was to re-evaluate the content of the training and examine whether the training has increased competence in project management. This research shows that the Laurea Certified Project Manager Training has been useful and the training has indeed increased attendees’ competence in project management. The interviewees also introduced ideas about various issues, which can be discussed and processed in future training sessions. The interviewees noted that the work of the project manager is *“something you want to do, not something you have to do”*. The work is challenging but also interesting and versatile.

“I enjoy the work of a project manager. I like the fact that the project starts and it ends. I like it when my work changes.”

The Laurea Certified Project Manager Training offers different kind of skills and knowledge, from specific solutions and skills to high-level competence. For knowledge development, collaboration with experts is important, but training needs to include other means of developing competence as well. Hakkarainen [18] highlights the importance of various collaborative platforms and encounters when reflecting on different informational practices and in collaborative knowledge creation. This helps learners combine personal and professional identities and build new ones, which are needed when facing different challenges. Further, collaboration is the best way to get support when needed.

In conclusion, the Laurea Certified Project Manager Training has achieved its form. The next step would be to consider the program design, leading towards more formal training that consists of independent tasks, such as exams and different levels of training. More focused levels, such as “basic” and “advanced” Laurea Certified Project Manager Training, would offer more specific information for competence development. What is meaningful and what could continue in future training is the possibility for attendees to share their experiences and learn from peers and colleagues.

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