

Project Management Series

SPOTLIGHT ON CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT



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Education: B.Eng. (Mech.)'09, MBA'19 (Memorial University), Project Management Professional (PMP)

Experience: Brian has over 14 years of professional experience in areas including offshore topsides fabrication, subsea fabrication for drilling and production equipment and construction experience in commercial facilities, high voltage AC DC utility substations of hydroelectric and natural gas power generation facilities. Currently, Brian is the project manager for a power generation facility for a potash mine expansion project and is supporting further expansion into western Canadian markets.



BRIAN CARROLL

LET'S TALK ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

As a project manager working for The Cahill Group, what are your main responsibilities? What does a typical day at work look like for you?

Construction is a hazardous industry and as a project manager with The Cahill Group, a Newfoundland and Labrador-owned, multi-disciplinary construction company, my primary responsibility is to ensure the safe execution of projects. I ensure that all safety policies and best practices are implemented such that all personnel are able to return home each day unharmed. Secondary responsibilities include overseeing planning, executing, monitoring and controlling of engineering, procurement and construction activities to support and deliver a high quality product on time and within budget to our clients.

Day-to-day, this can range from supporting engineering decision-making, constructability reviews, vendor package management for component manufacturing or working with

construction managers to assist in planning and monitoring activities in the field.

Why did you decide to get into project management?

When I finished my engineering degree in 2009, it was a tough time to enter the job market on the tail end of the financial crisis. There were limited opportunities, but fortunately I was hired by an offshore drilling contractor. My role was to support the rig manager as a project co-ordinator, which allowed me to gain experience with different teams required to operate a drill ship with various systems aboard a highly technical piece of equipment. Through this experience I learned that project management required me to apply my skillset across technical disciplines, business skills, communication skills, human resource management amongst others.

What are the benefits of developing project management skills as an engineer?

Engineering provides a foundation to perform technical problem solving to design or maintain a piece of equipment or a system. Project management provides additional skills to solve complex problems beyond the scope of the technical.

These include but are not limited to working with people, building teams, motivating stakeholders, ensuring processes are developed to safety and quality standards and understanding the broader business challenge in parallel.

What skills did you learn as an engineer that help you in project management?

The most important skills I learned as an engineer are the ability to thrive in high-pressure situations while maintaining a rigorous and systematic approach to problem solving. While these skills were taught via technical questions that required a strong understanding of mathematics and engineering, the underlying lesson was how to become a professional problem solver. After I finished my degree, I realized my education changed the way I approach everything in daily life.

“There is an information overload from every direction possible and you do need to have a systematic way to solve problems. If not, you’ll just get bogged down and never be able to accomplish anything.”

Which project management skills are the most useful/do you use most often at work?

Project management is always a balancing act of the 10 knowledge areas. In my experience, two of the most lucrative skills to optimize are the ability to build strong teams with dedicated and trustworthy people, and the ability to create a strong plan. If both of these goals are met, the requirements of other knowledge areas are easier to achieve.

“You cannot solve every problem yourself, and you really have to rely on your people.”

How has the ability to progress through various roles within one company helped make you a better leader?

In my career with The Cahill Group I have been fortunate to work with many great people that have provided education and mentorship. Working in a strong matrix organization, I have been able to work with various departments, clients and projects, which has highlighted that no two projects are alike. Progression through different roles has enhanced my skillset and taught me novel ways of working with people to achieve common goals while learning to adapt to situations as they change.

What are the biggest challenges and rewards as a project manager in construction?

Project management in construction is challenging in that the landscape is always changing and there is no straight line to success. Many construction projects have large complex budgets, which adds extra pressure to ensure optimization and prioritizing for success. The stakes are high. However, overcoming these challenges and seeing the amazing finished projects that our teams build is highly rewarding.

What advice would you give to someone who was looking to enter into project management in the construction industry?

Always be in pursuit of knowledge. No one in the industry knows everything and there is always more to learn. When you feel yourself becoming complacent, look for a pivot to motivate yourself to learn new skills. Never stay still because when you do get the opportunity to progress into project management, you will want to be in the best position you can to support your team. Remember, a strong project manager is not the person who can do everything themselves but is someone who can lead their team to achieve their collective goals and responsibilities.

“Never shelter yourself from learning a new skill.”

Have your project management skills ever helped you outside your career in a real-life setting?

Absolutely. Having a demanding job can create pressures on work-life balance. Project management has helped me hone my ability to cultivate social relationships and manage my time, which helps me alleviate some of those pressures. In addition, having relocated recently to Calgary, my ability to network and understand people has come into play as I develop new relationships outside the office.

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