

Project Management Series

SPOTLIGHT ON INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY



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Susan Gillingham

B.Comm. (Co-op.), PMP

Enterprise project manager, The Very Good Food Co.

Education: Certified Lean Green Belt, Certified Scrum Master (CSM), Certified Scrum Product Owner (CSPO), Project Management Professional (PMP), B.Comm.(Co-op.) '07 (Memorial University)

Work Experience: Susan's career started as a project management specialist with BlackBerry. After three years, she moved into the role of requirements lead/product owner. After gaining valuable experience with BlackBerry, Susan worked at Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) as an information technology (IT) project manager until she moved to her current position at The Very Good Food Company.



SUSAN GILLINGHAM

What do you love about being a project manager? What parts of project management do you find the most challenging?

I love the variety and diversity of projects I have had the opportunity to work on: websites, architecture for BlackBerry, retail, human resources systems and infrastructure/networks. I also like that most project managers have exposure to a lot of areas of the business and a lot of stakeholders. Having a breadth of knowledge is essential.

The most challenging is always the balance required to manage stakeholder expectations. Project managers have to manage up (C-level or board), across to other team members, and down to maybe more junior or frontline staff. Everyone has different expectations. Those differing expectations mean that one of the primary jobs of a project manager is to make sure there is a common goal across all stakeholders and to get the team across the finish line.

What was the catalyst that sparked your interest in project management?

"I love the intersection of people, process and technology as a whole in project management. I like having the big picture in mind."

LET'S TALK ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

What does an enterprise project manager at The Very Good Food Company do?

The Very Good Food Company is an emerging plant-based food technology company that designs, develops, produces, distributes and sells a variety of plant-based meat and other food alternatives. The fast-growing company started in British Columbia.

One of my primary responsibilities is leading a project focused on sourcing, selecting and implementing an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. This allows us to create organizational efficiencies across all major functional areas from manufacturing, operations, supply chain logistics and finance.

I'm also responsible for leading the day-to-day IT operations within the organization, setting the overall technology roadmap, establishing processes for our IT Project Management Office, and managing other new system implementations as needed.

I was always highly organized with good communication skills and it seemed like a natural career progression. I was also quite interested in business analysis. On a lot of smaller teams, project managers often have to act in that role as well. Luckily, I was able to gain some great work experience with my co-op placements and that led me to be able to apply some of those hours towards the prerequisite for a PMP certification. The PMP allows for some standard knowledge across all industries and functions. Sometimes I work with people from other countries, and everyone knows what a PMP is. It helps to speak the same [project] language when working with outside vendors and third parties.

How has your experience working for larger companies helped you in your current role with a business that's still growing?

Working at BlackBerry and MEC allowed me to gain exposure to different projects, more diverse issues and many levels of management. Being a part of larger organizations has allowed me to take those skills and experiences and apply them to events that arise in my current role. These experiences have given me the foresight I need to be proactive to avoid or capitalize on situations. I find it exciting to be part of such a fast-growing company on the upward trend.

With my current role, I must be able to adapt to any given situation. I have to show initiative in other areas of the business, often working with fewer resources. It has allowed me to make a faster impact. As a project manager, you sometimes are that magical unicorn that must act as a technical writer or system analyst or in a support role.

What was a situation that you learned from in your career?

I learned from a cancelled system implementation project. We had to cancel the project a few days before going live. It was a difficult decision to make; however, the quality necessary to move forward was not there. If we had continued, the project would have resulted in a sub-par system and less than ideal workflow for our front line staff members and customers.

Luckily, the organization had a culture that supported such difficult decisions and understood that pulling the plug was the best outcome in that case. We did in-depth lessons learned

information gathering and grew from the experience. In the end, we ended up selecting an entirely different vendor and system. As a project manager, you can do everything right, and projects may still fail.

You must communicate, communicate, communicate! We learned that it's important to communicate any issues or risks that arise on the project with the project sponsors and anyone on the team. This is where the importance of those soft skills is emphasized.

“Project managers must have many different tools in their toolkit for the varying projects and situations that may arise.”

What advice would you give to someone who is considering pursuing a career in project management?

“It's important to work at a company whose values and interests align with your own. All organizations need project managers. Find an organization where you will truly be interested in what the company delivers (whether directly for your project or not).”

Try to find a good mentor. Students can often find these mentors through internships (that's how I started) or through volunteering. Take every opportunity to learn from experienced project managers. Even with the PMP designation, experience speaks volumes. Knowing where to focus attention in project management is an important skill that can best come from experience.

Contact us

Dr. Jennifer Jewer, PMP
Faculty of Business Administration
Memorial University of Newfoundland
E: jenniferj@mun.ca