

Project managers can step up as economy pinches

Issued by [UCT Graduate School of Business](#)

6 Jul 2009

The UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) will this August host a course to enable experienced project managers to better align projects to business strategy and get the most value out of projects - essential skills as companies feel the pinch in a belt-tightening economy.



Dennis Comninos

South Africa may have been spared some of the major calamities that hit the US and parts of Europe, but, as news reports recount daily, the country has not gone unscathed, said project management consultant Dennis Comninos, who co-directs the UCT GSB's five-day course, Strategic Project Management.

Everywhere companies are cutting back on projects, said Comninos, while those that soldier on do so with tighter purses.

"The pressures are numerous for everyone involved in project leadership and implementation - there is a greater scrutiny of project expenses and of the business value to be gained. The message is clear for 2009: do more with much less."

That sentiment is echoed by the course's co-director Chris van der Hoven of the Cranfield School of Management in the UK. "The ability to select the right projects becomes more important than ever," says Van der Hoven, "as does the need to manage an existing portfolio of projects within time and budget."

That presents senior project managers with a host of opportunities, said Van der Hoven. "The best opportunities are available to those project managers with an ability to handle the uncertainty and additional ambiguity that comes with a more fluid working context."

To pull this off in the current environment, Comninos has a tip sheet for project managers. So, for example, he advises, they should: Become more proactive - good project managers should be making plans for the changes now; Draw up more rigorous business cases; Perform more vigorous prioritisation of projects; Make the best use of resources - and not just financial, but get the best out of people, be they leaders or team members; Focus more on value creation than deliverables; and Take a more agile approach to projects, concentrating more on objectives than activities.

Of particular concern for project managers, said Comninos, should be that often overlooked resource - people.

"The moment we start thinking about value, we have to think about how we draw the very best out of our team in order to deliver that value. Looking at our resources, the only variable we can really tweak - since time is time, and budgets are less flexible these days - is the way people behave, and how they perform. This will no doubt require some serious change management, but to get more out of our limited time and money, we need to get more out of our people, without exploiting them."

The UCT GSB course, which runs from 24 - 28 August, aims to impart these essential skills. It is directed at experienced and more senior portfolio, project and programme managers.

While the course dips into the leading and latest academic literature and theoretical sources, as befitting the reputation of both UCT and the GSB, the course is grounded in the realities of company floors, said Comninos.

“What we’ve done in the past is let people in the group identify the issues and problems. We then address these with a battery of tools and techniques.”

Value, and adding value, is high on the course's agenda.

“The course will instil in these individuals a deeper understanding of how to deliver value by looking at projects from a business perspective,” he notes, “and gives participants an understanding of how a project is conceptualised and initiated in support of the strategy and business plans of the organisation.”

And group members bring healthy bipartisan views to both teaching and learning in the classroom.

“There are those who know about strategy but not project management, and project managers who don't know a lot about strategy,” said Comninos. “What we’ve had to do is bring the strategists onboard the project management bandwagon, and bring the project managers onboard the strategy bandwagon.

“The advantage of learning in a class environment is the kind of cross-pollination that is part and parcel of putting a group of individuals with varied interests, strengths and experiences in one room and getting them to interact.”

The course is ever-evolving, and this year sees a new module on Customer Centric Innovation. The module will be introduced, said Van der Hoven, to provide “project leaders with a valuable process that they can deploy to help support a differentiated strategy”.

Comninos and Chris van der Hoven are internationally recognised experts, consultants, authors, and lecturers in the field of strategic and business focused project and programme management. Comninos also presents the UCT GSB's Project Management - A Business Focused Approach, a ‘fundamentals’ course on the subject for managers.

Strategic Project Management is offered by the UCT GSB Executive Education unit. The unit was listed by the International University Consortium for Executive Education (UNICON), the leading global body for the advancement of executive education, as one of six global innovators in executive education learning methodology in a 2008 review.

For details on the UCT GSB course, contact Mario Pearce on 021 406 1268 or email . Applications close on 7 August.

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