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# THE FUTURE OF EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP <sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

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If you asked project managers years ago to identify the role of an executive in a company that uses project management, the response would most likely be a description of the position of a project sponsor. The *PMBOK® Guide* and project management textbooks described how companies envisioned the ideal role of the project sponsor at that time.

If you ask the same question today, the answer would most likely still be a project sponsor but with a different role. As project management evolves, the role of an executive with regards to projects has changed in many companies. Factors such as identification with a failed project, salary and bonuses, and responsibilities were important to executives in the past. This paper will discuss the changes that have taken place in many companies as well as the reasons for the changes. The future highlights a clearer strategic value to this maturing role of that executive.

## THE NEED FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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Although project management has been in existence for several decades, credit for its birth and recognition as a profession is usually attributed to the aerospace and defense industries in the United States. As expected, there were significant challenges that had to be overcome, especially regarding the role of senior management.

Following World War II, the Department of Defense (DoD) recognized the need for significantly more products and services than in the past. Most of these new needs would be developed using competitive bidding practices. For the aerospace and defense industries, this necessitated a significant increase in the salesforce.

The salesforce was given the responsibility for managing almost all communications with DoD, including preparation of the proposals during competitive bidding, negotiating the final contracts, providing the client with status reports, answering all client questions and selling additional products and services. There were people initially assigned as project managers in addition to the salesforce. Most of the workers designated as project

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managers were engineers, usually with advanced degrees in engineering, and often with poor writing skills. Aerospace and defense contractors established technical writing departments to support project managers with poor writing ability. The salesforce took the lead in preparing the proposals.

The salesforce believed that since they were the prime communications point with the client, specifically DoD, they were the real project managers and “owned” their company’s rights to this client. The salesforce believed that they were both the “real” project managers and project sponsors in the eyes of their DoD clients. The salesforce believed that owning this right to be the prime contact point for clients would provide the salesforce with significant salary and bonus opportunities.

### **DOD INSISTS ON TWO CHANGES** \_\_\_\_\_

The salesforce initially functioned as both the project managers and sponsors on almost all of the projects. Unfortunately for the salesforce, DoD was unhappy communicating only with sales personnel after contract award. Whenever DoD had a technical question, the salesforce would respond, “We will get back to you with an answer shortly.” The delay in response often took days or longer. DoD began insisting that they be able to communicate as needed with the inhouse “technical” project managers who could answer their questions immediately.

The second issue was that most of DoD’s projects with defense contractors were headed up by military officers with the rank of Lt. Colonel, Colonel, or higher. These military personnel believed in the concept that “Rank has its Privilege,” (RHIP). As such, these military personnel believed that they were much higher in rank than the engineers and salesforce in the contractors’ organizations and began insisting that executives be assigned as project sponsors so that they could communicate with someone with their perceived rank and title.

Defense contractors assigned executives as sponsors, usually just to temporarily appease the clients, to respond to all of the business and strategic issues on the contracts. The creation of executive sponsorship positions created severe headaches for the sales personnel that still believed that they should be managing all communications with DoD. In one aerospace company, almost all of the marketing and sales personnel were fired, and the project managers and sponsors were then given the responsibility for all stakeholder communication.

### **INVISIBLE EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP** \_\_\_\_\_

As the number of government contracts increased, executive sponsors realized the pressure they were under by having to spend significantly more time than expected on

projects. Sponsorship was impacting on the time they needed to manage their functional responsibilities which were their primary concern.

DoD began asking for the names of the project sponsors to appear in the proposals as part of the competitive bidding process. Many executives adopted the approach of invisible sponsorship, or sponsorship in title only. Sponsorship was delegated to lower levels of management. When DoD/customer interfacing meetings were required, the executives would temporarily function as active sponsors to appease DoD and would be briefed on the agenda topics for the meetings and informed as to what they should or should not say during the meetings. At the meetings, the answers to almost all technical questions were made by the project managers. Sponsors responded to questions related to skill levels of the assigned workers, number of workers assigned, scope change costs, and future contracts.

## **THE GROWTH OF EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP** \_\_\_\_\_

The need for active rather than invisible executive level sponsorship appeared as companies began approving business-related projects to expand their global growth opportunities. Each new project was headed up by a project sponsor who could reside at the executive levels of management based upon the size and importance of the project. The business-related or strategic projects for growth required sponsors to perform many of the same functions as on competitive bidding type projects.

However, the business-related and strategic projects also included a great deal of risk that created problems for many executives. The greatest risks were with strategic projects that were based upon innovation and significant creativity needs. Executives knew that many of the projects would never be completed because of the environmental and marketplace risks. Cancelling failing projects early was a necessity.

In some companies, as many as 60-70 % of the strategic projects were considered as failures. Executives became fearful that having their name attached to a project that failed could damage their image and career advancement opportunities. Because of this fear, some executives tried to transfer sponsorship to lower levels of management in their organizational hierarchy.

## **THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF HISTORICAL SPONSORSHIP FAILURE** \_\_\_\_\_

Regardless of which level of management acted as the sponsor for projects, there were significant project failures, and the causes of the failures were always attributed to large or unexpected business risks. However, there was another significant cause of failure that eventually became apparent.

Executives and lower levels of management that performed as sponsors often received year-end bonuses and salary increases based upon the success of the projects in their functional units. These individuals intentionally assigned their best resources to short-term projects that could impact their income opportunities quickly. This decision amounted to using their authority, position and role of the sponsor, to keep the best resources for projects that impacted their income. They sacrificed the future of the company to maximize their near-term income. This reflected significant strategic gaps especially pertaining to valuing the priority of the different portfolio components.

## **NEW ROLE FOR EXECUTIVE-LEVEL PROJECT SPONSORS** \_\_\_\_\_

The 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the *PMBOK® Guide* provides excellent discussions of how project sponsorship should be performed. In addition to what appears in the *PMBOK® Guide*, there are two critical roles that many executives must fulfill today, and in the future, when performing as sponsors. First, the definition of project success is changing. Having customers accept the products and services created using project management is only part of the success story.

Future success is when the customers recognize the business benefits and business value they received from the project's deliverables and the result is the establishment of a lifetime partnership between the client and the contractor or supplier for additional or modified products and services. For this to happen, executives must function as project sponsors and find the time to communicate the business benefits and value to the clients and stakeholders throughout the complete life cycle of the project, and beyond. This critical role should remain at the executive sponsorship levels.

The second new role is active participation in the project selection and prioritization processes in their company. In the past, sponsors approved projects and established a priority. For many sponsors, this was their only involvement in the project.

Unfortunately, as time elapsed and other projects were approved and added to the portfolio, priorities changed, project constraints changed, assumptions made on many projects needed to be updated, new stakeholders appeared, and the availability of skilled resources to be assigned to the right projects created havoc.

Today, sponsors are still expected to participate in committee sponsorship activities that continuously evaluate the priority of all projects and, most important, the relationships and alignment to the organization's strategic business objectives. The importance of strategic business objectives can have a major impact on the decisions that the sponsors must make and how they can create a lifetime partnership with the clients and stakeholders.

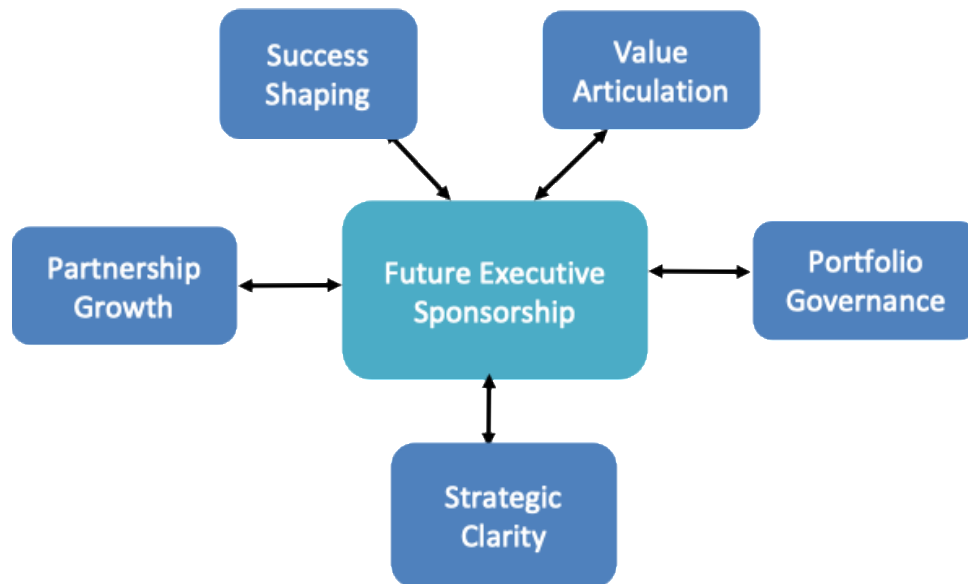


Figure 1 – The Future Building Blocks of Executive Sponsorship

## THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION

Within the last decade, there has been a significant resurgence in the acceptance of project sponsorship at the executive levels of management. There have been several reasons for the acceptance and willingness of executives to now be more actively involved in project sponsorship. First, the need to work on more strategic projects involving innovation and creative thinking has made it apparent that there will be a growth in projects that will not produce the desired results. Companies have restructured the corporate culture to include a willingness to accept some project failures without pointing blame on individuals as a necessity to expand their business opportunities.

Second, data analytics and the use of Project Portfolio Management Offices (PPMOs) have allowed executives to function as project sponsors on multiple projects concurrently. The PPMOs track the performance of all initiatives within the company and report customized metrics data for each executive. Executives no longer need to spend exorbitant amounts of time collecting meaningful project data. The PPMOs provide meaningful information to assist executives in validating the alignment of projects to strategic business objectives, project selection and prioritization activities, and project business and value benefits to support the development of lifetime strategic partnerships with clients and stakeholders.

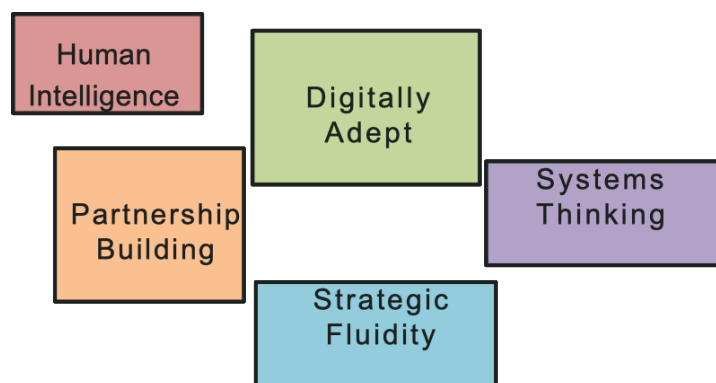
Third, growth in artificial intelligence applications, especially in ways to provide data on trends in some of the critical metrics, accompanied by the information provided by the PPMOs today allow executives to function as meaningful sponsors and make proactive rather than reactive decisions. Executive sponsors now have significantly more critical information than in the past for better business decision-making.

A fourth impact today is with the growth in crisis dashboards for executives. Historically, executives had to spend a great amount of time reviewing project status frequently to identify potential issues needing resolution. Crisis dashboards are customized for each executive acting as a project sponsor. Future executives will expand on today's mature practices and will stretch to handle sponsoring multiple projects and look at the crisis dashboards each morning to see if any projects have issues which may require their immediate attention. The information on crisis dashboards can be provided by the PPMOs, project managers, team members, clients, or stakeholders.

## THE PATH FORWARD

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Future executive sponsors, in a progressively digitalized world, will be able to scale their impact on a strategic portfolio of initiatives. As highlighted in Figure 2, these executive sponsors will possess critical capabilities that will enable their sustained impact on the portfolio's success.



**Figure 2 – Future Executive Sponsors Qualities**

With the investment in building and growing these qualities, future executive sponsors will be in an excellent position to balance their success with the overall strategic success of the enterprise and the associated success in achieving sustained value of portfolio's initiative's. Staying open to the changing dynamics in the workplace of the future, will

enable these executives to remain highly relevant and to continually operate as the strategic trusted advisor for public and commercial customers worldwide.

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## About the Authors



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**Dr. Harold Kerzner** is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.
- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
- The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
- The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
- The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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**Dr. Al Zeitoun** is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting frameworks implementations; and using his empathy, engineering insights, and collaboration strengths to successfully envision new business models and execute complex missions across diverse cultures globally.

In his recent role with Siemens, he was a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Master Plan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes and priorities.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the \$40B complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at [zeitounstrategy@gmail.com](mailto:zeitounstrategy@gmail.com)