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Interim managers in projects? We propose 4 strategies for a successful collaboration!

“Leave this to the experts!”

An increasing number of companies working on demanding projects faces the question: Can we actually do this? Interim managers are hired in difficult cases, which has so far been uncommon. However, times are changing. Kerstin Wünnecke, expert in interim management at next level consulting, explains how companies can choose the ideal interim manager for their projects and how these project experts can encourage the work flow, solve problems quickly and show the team to success.

The development of a new product quickly outgrew the competencies of the medium-sized company, because the project required more than expertise in development, design and prototype construction. The CEO reports that “we suddenly had to deal with complex patent issues, complicated financing and intricate matters relating to market launch. We had no project manager on our team, who could handle all these particular difficulties.” Thus, the CEO decided to hire an external project expert with individual qualifications: project-specific know-how, knowledge of the latest management approaches, a network of supporting specialists, and personal characteristics to successfully close down the project.

Deploying interim managers in projects used to be uncommon. But the situation has been changing because of the growing number of more complex and demanding projects. Recent trends show that project managers have had to shoulder a variety of tasks and great responsibility. This is particularly evident in software projects. Not only do managers have to be familiar with IT technologies but also they have to know how to introduce consumers and employees to the new software and how to change their habits. What is more, projects significantly contribute to the total turnover. For this reason, some companies depend on a few small projects, which simply must not go awry. “This financial

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pressure explains why companies inquire about interim managers in cases of difficult projects”, says Kerstin Wünnecke, project expert and business consultant at next level consulting in Vienna. Such project experts combine specialists and generalists’ characteristics and are confident and knowledgeable about numerous areas of expertise. The high requirements of projects render the selection and employment of interim managers onerous.

Our interim management expert recommends implementing the following 4 strategies:

1. Deal reasonably with the need to act

Many companies ask interim managers for help only in emergencies. They are expected to mend damages and put the project back on track. But companies fail to realise that “the later you try to correct undesirable developments the more expensive and time-consuming subsequent corrections will get”, emphasises Kerstin Wünnecke. She advises checking a project manager’s suitability in an initial risk disclosure.

Our interim expert reminds us that “an IT project, for instance, that seems unspectacular at first glance might easily develop into a tidal wave.” We also have to bear in mind that it is not all about technical tasks; organisational and cultural matters have to be considered as well, as employees have to be introduced to a new software. Project managers have to overcome employees’ resistance to new work processes, settle conflicts and convince employees of the success of the project. If a business software is launched in various countries, intercultural challenges will be met. Kerstin Wünnecke adds at this point that “interim managers do not necessarily have to close down the project.” They are often hired temporarily, for the project start, planning phase or for particularly demanding phases.

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2. Carefully select interim managers

Today, there is more to project experts than professional project management skills and job experience. State-of-the-art methods, leadership skills and, most importantly, project experience are essential requirements. A company has to compile a precise qualification and job profile to ensure the ideal project expert matches it. However, such experts are hard to find on the free market. “Our database consists of CVs and competence profiles of numerous experienced interim managers”, says Kerstin Wünnecke. Out of hundreds of potential candidates only 3 or 4 suitable interim managers remain for a particular job profile. This small number of realistically suitable candidates results from the high demands for having industry-specific experience and knowledge of specialised management approaches.

3. Make the project roll

Interim managers usually quickly work their way into a project and know how to win the company and employees’ trust. Kerstin Wünnecke highlights that “to be fully accepted, interim managers inevitably have to have particular knowledge of the project-specific industry, they have to know its characteristics.” Moreover, they are required to be masters of leadership instruments and tools. Besides social skills, interim managers need charisma and considerable standing, as they have to perform convincingly in their position. Therefore, candidates’ individual impression on the company influences their chances on the job. Our expert advises selecting candidates not merely based on their formal qualifications and CV but also on their demeanour. She warns not to be blinded by certificates. Ultimately, the real path to success involves mutual acceptance and personal preferences.

4. Work out solutions quickly

Accomplished interim managers provide experience as well as a network of various specialists, like experts in change management, project marketing or process changes. Such

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relations are indispensable in case of emergencies in a project. One big advantage is that interim managers can assess the qualification and experience of their experts. In many cases, they have already collaborated in previous projects and can quickly solve difficulties together. Kerstin Wünnecke recommends consulting professional service providers for interim management as a precaution. Such service providers often offer an extensive network of proven experts. She concludes that “it is crucial that such service providers equip companies with interim managers who will support the customers even subsequently during the project’s further development.”

About next level consulting:

next level consulting offers consulting services for project and process management, change management as well as for the development of project- and process-oriented organisations. With more than one hundred experts next level consulting is working for companies in diverse sectors, mainly from the IT and telecommunication industry, machinery and plant engineering, industry as well as pharmaceuticals, mobility and logistics, banks and insurance companies. In addition, the business that was founded in Vienna in 2000 is conducting consultancy projects in the health sector, in public administrations as well as NGOs. The business consultancy operates branches in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Slovakia, France, South Africa, Thailand, Singapore, Australia and USA.

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