

# BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP

Around one third of Australia’s project managers will retire in the next decade creating a major skills shortage in leading industry sectors, according to AIPM Chief Executive Officer Peter Shears. He spoke with SARAH CUMBERLAND about the generation gap and how the industry can bridge the divide

“As a third of our membership exits the profession in the next 10 years, they will leave a major gap in experience and business acumen to backfill. That spirit of risk-taking leadership that has characterised this generation of project managers just won’t be there in 10 years’ time,” Shears said.

Nearly 50 per cent of AIPM’s membership falls within the 40 to 54 age group and another 10 per cent in the 55 to 60 age bracket face imminent retirement.

Mapping the ages of AIPM members reveals that there are essentially two distinct generations of project managers, with two noticeable peaks: one at 27 and another at 55 years. These two generations differ quite radically in their training and the way they approach their job.

The older generation has spent years developing skills, learning from mistakes made along the way, and using intuition to make decisions. Most of these people have a technical background, such as engineering or architecture, and they maintain their original professional status. They didn’t choose project management as their major career choice but have adopted the mantle during their career. This ‘streetwise’ generation has strong organisational or industry knowledge and experience.

The younger ‘aspirational’ generation of project managers tends to have specific qualifications for project management. That is, they are pursuing project management as a core discipline and a career of choice. They want recognition of their training qualifications which are generally quite high. While they have a strong knowledge base, they are looking for opportunities to apply this knowledge. They tend to be risk averse, and adopt “safe” strategies to achieve project outcomes – there is little tolerance for error by the older generation of managers.

This generation has a strong reliance on systems, processes and decision-making tools to allow them to develop business acumen in a safe environment.

For the older generation, these tools are there to confirm what they already think, and their training is predominantly competency-based assessment. That is, it is designed to verify skills learnt on the job. They see project management as a means of increasing the application of their core technical skills.

“While older project managers had 30 years to develop skills, today’s generation has to fast track to accumulate the same range of skills in just five to 10 years,” said Shears.

The project management industry is not alone. Most professional bodies recognise this problem of generational difference. How can industries bridge the generation gap?



Peter Shears, AIPM CEO

## ‘Accidental’ Project Managers

- Trained in a technical profession such as engineering
- Skills acquired on-the-job
- Experienced
- Use intuition in decision making

## ‘Aspirational’ Project Managers

- Project Management is career of choice
- Specific qualifications in Project Management
- Risk averse
- Reliance on tools and processes in decision making

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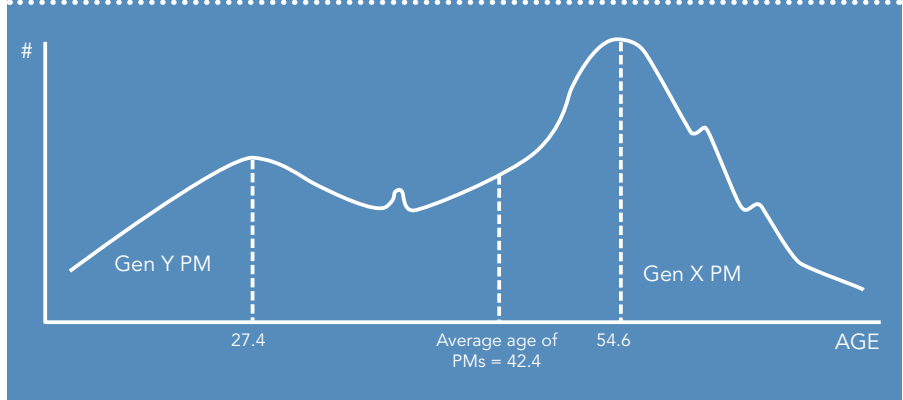
According to Shears, there is an urgent need for knowledge transfer, and mentoring by older project managers. “The younger generation must be allowed to make mistakes (as their predecessors did) and run with a live project to prove their training,” he said.

“They need to be shown leadership and respect for their different pathways of development.

“If these changes don’t take place and young people are not taught these skills, we will see a few years of turmoil as organisations are forced to come to grips with the issue,” Shears said.

“At the moment mentoring is seen to be working at company level but it’s inevitably laid on top of a manager’s existing workload. I’m proposing companies take pre-retirement project managers off sensitive projects and make them full-time mentors.

The industry should not forget about the contribution its most senior project



managers could make. Four per cent of AIPM members are retired. “Their continued membership indicates that they still value their involvement in the industry. How can we retain this rich resource of knowledge so that they can hand the baton to the younger generation?”

With project management skills becoming a secondary competency in most professions, the knowledge of experienced practitioners will be in high demand across all industries. Competency in project management will become part of a portfolio of skills for all individuals, not just the project manager specialist. ♦