

At the Helm

Project management has much in common with the art of sailing. You have a protracted period of time from the start of your voyage to your final destination. There are a multitude of small tasks to perform, from setting the rigging to hoisting the sails – and unexpected storms can throw the vessel into disarray.

The captain is charged with keeping the ship on course, as well as directing all the sailors to their various tasks – much like a project manager. In the current climes, however, captains have a tougher job with faster winds and fewer hands on deck; however with innovative skills the results are still there.

Instead of experienced team members spending inordinate amounts of time preparing a tender

The new face

"Bulk Handling Today" had a chance to speak to Stephen Meijers, director of ELB Engineering, to clarify some of the issues currently hounding traditional project management, and how companies have adjusted to cope with the new challenges facing them.



Stephen Meijers, director of ELB Engineering

"There are two major issues driving the morphing project management landscape, both of which exist outside of ELB's domain," begins Stephen. "We're dealing with the external, global issue of commodity pricing, and clients' demands have taken on a frantic air as their projects are based on the commodity demand and prices. We're expecting shorter project deadlines as a result.

"Secondly, there hasn't been a correspond-

ing growth in resources to match the sheer number of projects that are coming online. Renumeration packages are shifting resources around the market, so the demand inflation has risen dramatically and is impacting on the cost of the project for the client."

At odds

Realistically, the

Project management has become increasingly difficult, with a number of issues weighing on a project managers mind. According to Stephen, it's not a case of working faster, but smarter

expectations are at odds with one another. Clients want shorter project times in order to take advantage of the high commodity prices but there are fewer people to do the work. While project durations and lead times may not be getting any shorter, the demand has led to some interesting developments in project management practices.

"One aspect that has often hindered project execution is the tendering process. Companies have begun to work with 'preferred suppliers', who get involved right from the conceptualisation and feasibility stage of the project. This greatly decreases the time between feasibility and the tender stage. Now, instead of experienced team members spending inordinate amounts of time preparing a tender, they can be placed where their skills will be most beneficial."

Stephen also pinpoints 'smarter' engineering as playing a big role in cutting down on project durations. "Take, for example, erecting components on site. Traditionally, most of the components would be assembled and tested on site. With the shorter lead times, fabricating all of these individual pieces, assembling and then testing them all on site puts a strain on project houses.

"So instead, we pre-assemble components at the fabricators and have begun to implement more intense quality testing at the fabricating stage of the project, and then adapting an Australian erection methodology of large and heavy lifts on site. This methodology not only reduces erection time but reduces the amount of work at heights."

Prototype for profit

Stephen highlights a particular project where ELB worked on a new clam shell feeder arrangement, which was unique to the South African environment. "It was



incredibly innovative. We aligned the fabricator with our team during the 3D modelling stage of the project. We also built a prototype to iron out all the issues before going to full production."

In other words, by taking what may have been unnecessary time to build the equipment and then build it again, the team avoided potentially critical errors that may have held the project back for months."

Procurement

The other major issue is procurement, which increasingly seems to have become part of the lexicon of both engineers and project managers alike. Stephen notes that it has become an integral part of the planning process rather than another 'step in the stairway' to be surmounted.

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"The focus has changed from being project or engineering-driven to procurement-driven," he states. "We're now pushing procurement procedures well ahead of the actual engineering, running parallel

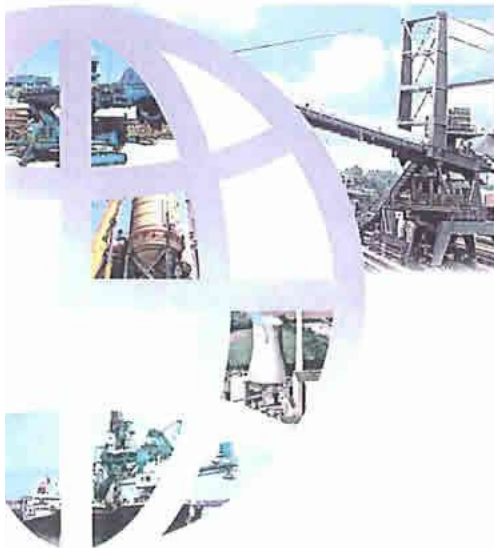
to that programme. So during the conceptualisation stage of the project, we work closely with the client, to the point that we basically know what we'll be building and our preferred suppliers can begin to give us proposals."

This multi-planar approach to project management has extended itself to the resource pool. Stephen states that clients, project houses and suppliers are all supplementing their own skills shortages with those from other companies.

Friendly reminder

Ending off, Stephen cautions the industry, saying: "The traditional model of, 'if you want our business, you will do it in x number of months' has certain risks. The present environment prevents companies from performing under these year demands, despite the best intentions," says Stephen. "Ultimately, we're all cooking with the same water."

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