Chapter XXIV

E-Lancing

Forming teams in a virtual environment is typically an ad hoc process. Usually, project managers draw from talent inside their organizations or from people that they or other team members know from previous interactions. You’re really limited by who you know or by the size of your extended social network. So how do you know that you have formed the strongest team possible with people who have the specific knowledge and experience that your project needs? Ideally, as a project manager, you could advertise the types of skills you are looking for, and people could apply to work on that project based on their availability, expertise, and interest.

Working with MIT

In August 2001, we launched a research project with MIT to experiment with a new way to staff projects. Tom Malone and Rob Laubacher had been working on a concept called e-Lancing where freelance workers and employers come together in the open market through the Internet to form virtual working teams. We wanted to take that concept and move it from an open market environment into the enterprise to determine if it would be an effective model for staffing technology research projects.

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We were members of a 100-person team distributed across 70 different locations focused on strategy, research, and development. The organization was formed around the idea that teams should not be static and hierarchical but rather fluid groups that were gathered together based on common interests and skill sets. Howard Bain was the leader of this organization and described why this model was used rather than a traditional organizational structure. “We don’t want to build silos. We feel most breakthroughs come about when you mix and match people with different kinds of expertise.”

Supply and Demand

Typically, when staffing a project, you have a supply of people resources and a demand from the projects. In our alternative staffing model, we wanted to introduce the concept of creating a supply of projects and managing the demand for those projects by team members. After creating a set of potential project ideas, we advertised the ideas and resources requirements through e-mail.

Sometimes, project teams would hold peer reviews in which individuals could come together in a forum and review an idea or project and provide input to its creation or design.

Members from the organization could see what new projects were available and express interest based on their availability and skills. Using this model of advertising available projects and allowing the entire organization to view and select activities to work on had the following advantages:

- Staffing was not limited to people who were known to the project manager or other team members—projects were exposed to the entire organization. People who previously were not considered for a project because they were not the obvious choice now had an opportunity to contribute.
- Team members had more control over how they spent their time, since they could select the projects they wanted to work on rather than be given an assignment.

We also created a database that contained every employee in the organization. Employees could edit their own data to include a list of their technical
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