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The Small Project Conundrum in SMEs

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are drivers of innovation, competitiveness, and growth. SMEs contribute to CARICOM's GDP and are key sources of employment. Just as SMEs are drivers of innovation, so too are small projects to achievement of business goals, creating a symbiotic relationship between day-to-day operations and effective small project delivery.

Little evidence exists on managing small projects or project management in Caribbean SMEs. In a business, it is not easy to identify a small project in everyday work. Discussions continue about the most appropriate model for managing small projects and definite classifications criteria by project size have not yet been concluded. As such, presently, it is not clear whether SMEs manage, or should manage projects in the same way as a large company.

There is a connection between the company size and the project size that it takes on. Companies tend to pursue smaller projects, often inserting these in a pre-existing or operations-dominant environment where they do not take precedence. This is particularly constant in SMEs where project size is mainly considered in terms of cost as opposed to value contribution.

In application, many projects, especially small ones, do not use suitable project management methodologies. A key reason for this is the lack of project management knowledge and accumulated substantial amounts of documentation that are not pragmatic or desirable in small projects. This is a crucial discussion and any method focused on producing documentation at the expense of delivering the project's real advantages becomes an obstacle rather than a benefit.

One issue with small projects is that they are hardly identified as such. They are started extremely fast without clear identification of the problem to be solved, and planning leads to uncontrolled changes in scope, poor stakeholder identification, low consideration of risks, failure to implement effective

communication, and the promoter walks away. It is a flaw that should not occur in SMEs, whose main advantages include easy communication and the fact that the promoter is often inside the company itself.

One of the first issues to be raised is that of small project categorization. In this respect, the most generally adopted criteria to classify projects according to their size are duration, cost, and size of the project team.

Nevertheless, from time to time the greatest issue does not revolve around project categorization, but because a job to be done is not recognized as a project in the first place. There are unfortunate examples of this lack of project management discipline over the last twelve months in sub-contracted smaller companies where redundant maintenance tasks went wrong, resulting in human lives being lost e.g., the Paria diving tragedy in 2022 and the plant accident at Niquan in 2023.

In a company's everyday work, it is sometimes difficult to separate project work from daily operations. If a project is not recognized as such, unfortunately, it is not planned or identified by the promoter, the team member roles are not made clear, and the risks are not adequately or clearly identified. Similarly, what we often call a routine task or assignment should be considered a project, as this allows defining expectations with the best use of resources, eliminating the frustration of wasted efforts and unnecessary re-working.

In cases where it might seem absurd to treat some tasks as projects, we may use a checklist that will help to identify a work package, task, or activity as a project. If answers to the questions on the checklist are affirmative, in some cases, a project management discipline might be helpful to manage this activity or activities.

A methodology that includes processes and tools designed specifically to manage small and simple projects should be applied. It must be based on four processes that occur in all phases of the project life cycle such as initiation,

which includes activities that lead to project start-up, planning, measuring tasks and activities, and the closing process to finish the project with lessons learned.

Over the last two and a half decades, a movement known as 'agile' has arisen in software projects that deliver work in small, incremental steps. This method helps project teams evaluate and adapt to change continuously while collaborating with customers and offering alternatives to the typical formal method by delivering value faster. Although the "agile" method commenced in software projects, the method has made significant inroads in finance and industrial projects, and its philosophy is being adapted to projects in other fields as well. Currently, SMEs require project management models that are less bureaucratic with a distinct set of tools compared to the traditional tools designed for large or medium-sized projects, with different variants depending on whether the project is medium, small, or micro. "Agile" provides an alternative to traditional methods that rely on fixed plans, rigid hierarchies, and long delivery cycles.

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