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Project Management and Consulting is the speciality of this week's "Ask the Expert" interviewee and Non-Executive Director of iHandover, Kevin Burt.

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Kevin is an accomplished Senior Executive with over 25 years' worth of experience in Project Management. His career, predominantly in mining operations, took him to sites in many different countries around the globe, such as Australia, Namibia, Tanzania, Kazakhstan and the Ukraine.

In this exclusive interview with iHandover, Kevin discusses his experiences of working internationally in Project Management. Kevin also shares insights in to coaching and training, the improvement of organisational structures and the development of management systems.

You have vast experience in coaching, mentoring and training people. What are the crucial factors to consider in this position?

First of all, it's important to understand the current skill set and the relevant and often very different experiences of your audience, especially when dealing with a crowd. There's also a big difference between coaching an individual and coaching a team. When you're trying to coach or mentor an individual, it's easier to pick up on their specific weaknesses. These weaknesses could be a lack of skills, knowledge, experiences or something more aligned with driving the wrong behaviours, such as confidence, fear or mental models. The key is getting the individual to accept their weakness, and that they are the only obstacle to achieving their desired goals. With

acceptance of what needs to change it really becomes a case of training, advising, motivating them how to develop.

Personal improvement plans developed by the individual are a great way of documenting what needs to be done by when. There has to be a clear understanding that the coaching or mentoring can be emotionally difficult for the individual as they try to overcome their difficulties. It will be very personal for them, but the coach or mentor should behave in a way that builds confidence and empathise but not sympathise.

It's different when you're dealing with a crowd or group, because of the increased variability that exists. However, the benefit of coaching a crowd is recognising the weaknesses of the team as a whole, in terms of being able to accomplish a joint task, goal or objective, and getting the team as a whole to recognise their strengths and weaknesses. You can also create a lot of positive peer pressure in a team to make change happen quickly.

What was the most challenging role that you have faced so far in your career, and why?

I guess it would be when I was working in a multinational aluminium manufacturing business, which was building construction products. The role itself and the whole working environment had lots of issues from day 1.

There were many different constraints in the business, performance was unreliable and many organisational components weren't being effectively managed, such as political aspects, culture and communication. It was a state of anarchy best described as "every person for them-self". There were lots of different drivers and change initiatives being introduced at the time, including "Lean manufacturing" (TPS) and maintenance strategies such as Total Preventative Maintenance (TPM) as well as a very heavy IT implementation using Oracle. All employees were trying to achieve better process control but clearly had little understanding of manufacturing management, and were struggling to describe what their management systems should look like.

In addition, and on a personal note, my change management knowledge was probably significantly greater than of any person in the business who had a similar role to mine, or even the level above mine, this was due to my education. However, at the time I did lack experience and my position lacked the authority to implement the required changes. So often when problems occurred, I was the go-to person. Initially it was interesting, but eventually it became overbearing as people were taking snippets of information or knowledge and trying to make changes that were not sustainable due to not having a full systems approach. Looking back, I become part of the problem. However, the opportunity to experience such a vast amount of change gave me the confidence to find roles where I had the accountability to deliver sustainable change.

My role like others was a convoluted single role. I was given the accountability but not the authority of a mixture of roles such as Manufacturing Manager / Supervisor, Fabrication Manager, Planner and CNC Programmer, all because I had knowledge

across these areas. This basically turned what should have been an average job into an intensive, almost 18 hours a day, 7 days a week, type of role.

And how did you cope with this role?

Ultimately, I wanted to go improve myself and learn more. I was young, energetic, and wanted to take the time to do my MBA, which the company was against.

Their reasoning was if I had taken a day a week to do my MBA, who were they going to turn to?

They made promises of additional promotion in a couple of years' time, to Director's level...But to me, they seemed like false promises and due to the aforementioned anarchy, there was little trust or confidence that the situation was going to improve.

My thoughts were, if they weren't going to allow people to upskill and develop themselves, then I saw that lack of development as potentially career-halting.

The constraints were a lack of clear accountabilities and role holders were in roles that simply did not match their current capabilities. This often made me the single point of information and ultimately when you're in that position, information isn't shared properly, people cannot make the best use of it, and you can also become the focal point when things go wrong.

By wanting to assist in removing problems in a dysfunctional business, you also make yourself feel responsible for the outcomes. These dysfunctional environments create toxic cultures where the consensus of people attitudes becomes "don't care", "don't want to learn or develop" and "don't want to accept accountability". I guess it was a breeding ground for people to walk away from things that were going wrong, whereas my natural instinct was to step in and to solve it, even if that included accepting accountability for work that really wasn't part of my role.

How do you think the lack of accountability and knowledge transfer could have been solved?

At the time, I had a reasonable view on why things were not going well, and started to install visible management tools, so people couldn't walk away from the evidence of where constraints were noticeable or where I believed the next accidents / incidents were going to come from. Implementing a tool like this actually upset a lot of people, because I was forcing accountability to certain areas, this included peers and managers higher than me in the organisation. Although in many respects the exposure of issues started to help generate a more positive environment, it became quite a boiling pot overall.

What the company really needed was a strategic change. It needed a restructure to help deliver clear accountabilities and to get the business to move forward. It needed to ensure roles were filled with capable people. It needed a way of consolidating and making sense of all the information to make the necessary improvements in process flow, essential maintenance and getting the orders out on time in full. Unfortunately, the strategic change or restructure wasn't there, and there was little sight of change happening. So for me, it actually got to a point where I realised that I was in a role that

I could not add a lot to. I had a lot of relevant knowledge, but I wasn't going to develop personally by staying there. I decided the MBA was more important, and I left to start my own business.

The frustrating point when looking back is that there were so many positive changes that could have been made. On a personal positive side, it was probably one of the best things I ever did, due to the exposure and self-actualisation giving me a clear direction.

It seriously exposed the problem of having single people with lots of knowledge that walk out of the business. When I left, the company had to go and hire a number of different people to replace my position!

You often only stayed at a site for a short amount of time before moving on to the next project. How did you handle working in continuously new environments?

It's actually a pleasure to be moving to different locations and different projects. For me the opportunity to travel and get to know different cultures and create amazing experiences is a privilege. A project could last anywhere between 3 months and 2.5 years, but project phases would probably be 9 months on average. A big review would last about 3 months.

And how do you manage that?

First of all, time management is extremely important. Having a clear goal and understanding of where the project is at and where you can add value, is also very important. I would suggest that when you initially start a business, any role or project, understanding that business by its numbers and metrics allows you to very quickly get to grips with where the issues are, so you can add value straight away.

My work covered anything from organisation redesign, productivity improvement, and health and safety. To look at the key drivers you have to know about the finances, the people and the culture.

Understanding the business by numbers helps you not only to understand the constraints of the business, but also the dilemmas the managers that you are going to talk to will be considering. Straight away you will have something of value to talk about. It allows you to go in and have a conversation about the pains they experience and understand what they're doing about it. It also stops you from presenting the same type of solutions that may have been tried previously and failed. If previous initiatives have failed, it allows you to understand why they have failed. The solution or initiative might be the most suitable, but it might have just been implemented incorrectly.

Did you complete any special preparation or induction before starting as a project manager on a new site?

I start from a holistic perspective, it is essential preparation to look at the company and its surrounding social environment. I need to understand the health and safety risks for myself and my team, as well as the social and political environment of the business, because they can also be drivers effecting change.

I then review the business itself. I read published performance analytics and news articles to ensure appropriate context to support any onsite information, graphs and data. I also brush up on core methodologies around organisation restructure, lean manufacturing, health and safety, risk and consider any new white papers etc.

Additionally, I need to make sure my team has done the same and any project protocols, reports and defined relationships are all clearly understood.

The rest of it starts as soon as you put your feet on the ground. You probably spend up to the first 8 weeks of a job intensively researching and getting those numbers, getting hold of the history of the business, so you can understand where their pains and constraints are.

On average, how long did it take you to settle in at a new location?

From a business consultant's point of view, as someone who already knows what to go and investigate, it takes me up to 8 weeks of research in a complex work environment.

Coming in as a new employee, you would be more focused on your job than the whole business. It would take you a lot of time then to understand how your job affects the business, and how other people working in the business would affect your capability to complete the expectations of your role.

We take a whole company, or whole asset-wide view of things. Whereas a role-holder that's never had to understand the business basics of the various functions, finances, health and safety structures and so on, will come up against those issues later. I can see an individual walking into a business and trying to make a change, and then finding out that the structure itself is working against them, it happens! There might be issues of accountability; there might be many levels or too many people in the wrong area.

I'm thinking of a client that I had in Africa last year; they simply had way too many people resources to be effective. It took a long time for the manager to figure that out, whereas for somebody that comes in and looks at the work and matches that to resources, it becomes obvious pretty quickly.

Many of your positions involved improving organisational structures. Could you give examples of the most severe issues you have faced?

I'd say the most difficult reorganization project was in Kazakhstan, where the first issue for me personally was dealing with a different language, so everything had to be translated. In every project it's common to face a bit of friction when introducing change, and there is a need to be culturally sensitive. When you have to communicate through a translator, words, intonations and whole perspectives can be lost or misunderstood. That can open the door to conflict.

The second difficulty was that the team members all had very little experience in delivering this particular piece of work, both from the consultancy side and from the client side. This again made me the single point of contact and knowledge. However as the Project Manager, I now had the opportunity, accountability and authority to try and cascade the knowledge, which involved intensive training of my consultant team and the clients.

The other thing worth mentioning is that an additional stressor had been placed on the project, where the objective was to identify if there was an opportunity to reduce the headcount of the business by at least 30%. Consequently and understandably this created a lot of ill-feeling, whilst we were interviewing people about their roles and trying to identify waste that needed to be removed to create the vacancies.

We had resistance against process and productivity improvements, availability for interviewing, and the willingness to provide meaningful information required to restructure the business. The approach caused a volume of conflict that wasn't necessary.

Eventually, the restructure took place, the client could clearly communicate in a new organisational language and they continued to implement the approach in all other entities of the business, so a huge positive.

However, at the end of the project, the company decided not to remove the identified 30% of the people after all! In Kazakhstan, having thousands of people suddenly unemployed would have created turmoil in the country. The company was rightly concerned about what it was going to do to the local economy and what it was going to do socially, which led to their decision. Eventually they decided to move towards reducing headcounts slowly over a number of years, rather than a sudden cut as part of the restructure. I believe if they hadn't set that precedent of removing 30% of the people in the project objective, they would have found a lot more benefits in process changes, improved efficiencies and a lot more approval and buy-in to the new structure.

It was a difficult, but enjoyable project that had many challenges that were overcome.

Could you tell us more about your work in developing management systems and processes?

In most places that we work, we think about the objectives, for example in mining it's to move material from A to B and liberate the valuable ore from the encased material as cheaply and efficiently as possible.

However, sometimes support functions don't really add visible or perceived direct value to the core functions, and the core functions don't always communicate and present their relationships very well in terms of management systems. What tends to happen is each core function organically starts to work in what is often described as 'silos'. When you start to map together a management system, you take a holistic view of the whole business. You look at where the company is intending to go in the next 1 to 20 years, given its current state. You then start to understand what types of plans are being put in place to achieve the forecast or the goals.

That's usually where we start to find some issues in terms of different agendas, lack of sequencing of work, or of poor communications.

Once the improvement plans are agreed and turned into a project schedule, the control and reporting of functions becomes aligned and simplified. It's like watching a failing sports team suddenly perform and develop. Due to technology, these reporting and control mechanisms are improving at a significant pace. With repositories to store and access information, with shared documents to make it easy for creative contributions and real time, reliable information can be available when required.

Once the data is provided on a daily, weekly or monthly basis in terms of the attainment of the plan, it still requires somebody to make sense of the information. Often analysis and decision making capabilities are an area that is still unfortunately heavily neglected and data is reported up the hierarchy without the value of subject matter expertise being supplied.

The behaviour becomes "This is what we did", but neglecting to consider the key questions which should continually be asked, such as "What did we do that was different? What did we do that was wrong? How can we do things better? How can we eliminate the risks? These questions are often not part of discipline or routine.

Some of the technology that's coming through now is fantastic. It's got all the data, flashing lights, it looks very good but people still need to be able to make sense of the data.

What tends to happen is that the information is collated and passed through the peers, until somebody at a higher level looks at the data and asks "What's going on?" Unfortunately, this often occurs at the level at which that analysis should not take place. This forces the hierarchy to step down and start doing the type of work that they shouldn't be doing. It would be great if every report covered "Here are the statistics", and "here's what we're going to do about improving it", but unfortunately that's often not the case.

Where do you see the future of project management and consulting going?

The previously mentioned shows that organisational learning, in my opinion, can be improved tremendously. Organisations currently keep making the same or similar mistakes. Though I have noticed in the last couple of years, there have been lots of new roles created in the areas of “analyse” and “improve”. This has seen the rise of roles such as Analysing and Improvement Engineers, Statistical Engineers, Process Improvement Engineers.

From a consultant’s perspective, that was and always will be a large part of our work. A consultant’s “analyse and improve” project phase is essential to help build healthy systems and processes that allow the right information to be given to the right manager, so they can make the right type of decisions.

As companies are bringing in specialised individuals to look at the systems and process control, making sense of the information and giving it to the managers to make decisions, what a lot of companies are actually doing is that they’re removing the thinking from the management position, which could have further implications.

The concern is if you haven’t had to think through a situation yourself, you don’t always appreciate its value or risks. What results are additional silos in the business, where data is collected and understood, and then passed on to people to authorise.

Those who collate and make sense of the data pass the information to the role holder who has the authority to make the decision. The decision still might not get made.

There may be no closed loop in terms of feedback, this breeds, a situation of “Well I keep giving you information but you never do anything with it”, and the position and task becomes diluted in value.

In the same respect if tools, processes and systems are not designed, implemented and reviewed with those who need to be engaged, the same results are seen. Just take a look at all the half completed or incorrectly filled in documents in any place of work. These are representative of failing standards, and a lack of understanding or value in the information required.

I think removing the “Analyse and improve” piece of work away from the manager is a mistake, and it’s happening as a trend. In my opinion it is going to be to the industry’s detriment, ultimately, especially if or when unexpected incidents occur.

Here’s the thing about matching capability and role. If you’ve got both, that means that you’ve got the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to make sense of information and make an informed judgement, and act upon it because you value the work. Now, if somebody else is doing the thinking for you, and you make a decision that doesn’t work, then this creates what is termed a blame culture; where an individual points their finger at the person that provided the information.

The foreseeable issues we expect is that this new trend may create more higher risk issues horizontally and vertically, or slow the decision making process down. In essence the mental capability that used to excel people’s careers toward the apex of the business (Financial, Accountants and IT) are stepping into the “Analyse and improve” roles. The work of consultation will be to reverse this issue, or assist in

helping organisations find a way to make it work. More emphasis will be placed on consultants to develop new methods to perform diagnostics that show the capability or decision making risks an organisation has allowed to occur.

An example of this was a recent client in the financial sector who was astonished when they were shown their risk profile and the extent or impact of a poor decision combined with the roles (decision making requirements and authority). The financial sector has seen this in well publicised cases before.

Further changes that a consultant needs to adapt to is, all the basic improvements or “low hanging fruits” are also changing. The industries have learnt through implementing proven methodologies and are now more efficient and effective. Now both the industries and consultants are utilising more IT, Software, and big data to help them make the next phase in improvements.

Could you tell us what role the improvement of shift handovers played in your work?

My own shift work in the aluminium business would probably be more relevant to this question than my work in project management. Because of the rotations, there would usually be two different people that you would see, and potentially a third one every third or fourth week.

I would walk into one shift, and there was a very professional colleague who had everything standardised. His methodology and script was very clean and concise, factual to a point, and supported with information. And even though the information he'd be welcoming you with might be horrible and negative to hear, you were at least presented with all the well-organised information that you needed to get control of things and hit the ground running.

Now there was another person that I used to have handovers with. It was a nightmare! He would greet me with something along the lines of “I didn't have time to write anything down, but I'll try to tell you what I can remember...But I can't remember a lot”.

There was no consistency, the information flow was terrible. As soon as he'd walk out, I knew I would spend the next three to four hours scrambling to understand where the business was at in terms of its orders, its processes, resources, everything. I used to hate taking the work on from him, so much that I wouldn't sleep the night beforehand!

The difference between the two handovers was significant. In a business you just cannot have unreliable management systems, processes and information, output of plans, and you cannot have unreliable people either. Reliability, standards and factual information is essential in handovers.

From a project consulting perspective, we don't actually stay at these assets for the duration. You hand over to the client, and you cannot have any accountability or ownership of the work or decision making itself. It's assisting good people to obtain good information, and hoping that they'll make the decisions. When you're handing over to a client, you set down a plan of work that details where do you expect them to get to by the time you return. They also need to hand over to you, explaining “yes the

plan happened” or “no it didn’t happen, and here are the reasons why, as well as all the other things that have happened”.

Getting a client to use and value reliable information flow, and completing a very clear, concise handover, actually helps improve the momentum and project goals.

Have you ever experienced any failed handovers or miscommunication that had serious consequences?

Yes, it happens all too often!

In the aluminium business, part of the process was chemical pre-treating, where the sequencing is very important. We had cases where alarms had been going off during the night, but hadn’t been passed over.

As a supervisor, you would start your shift with a situation that was brewing, but that you hadn’t been informed about. Then within the first couple of hours of the shift, the whole thing would run out of sequence. It would take you up to two days to catch up with production. The costs effects were significant from the right information not being handed over.

It’s also quite a complex manufacturing environment, where different parts of different orders could be scattered all over, and at some point you need to bring them together to batch them as one, or to assemble them. If you lose traceability of the different components, it becomes a case of finding a needle in a haystack.

When there’s a delay in information being passed on, you get to a point where the order is supposed to be shipped and packed and the part is still missing or hasn’t been worked on. You’ve already caused all these additional delays, and if the order is urgent and due to go out, you end up knocking all the other orders back, which causes further constraints and pressures on the business.

So there’s the delay factor of not having an effective handover, involving health, safety and cost performance, which is significant.

Another example of a poor handover that would have cost a lot of money was in the same business, but in the “unitized curtain walling” unit: They build big buildings very quickly nowadays, the glazing is done outside and off-site in a complete unit and they just attach those completed sections onto the building.

The project was the Lowry Hotel in Manchester, and I was approached by the European Director accountable for the completion of the project. I had only been there a couple of months, when he told me they had got a few issues at this particular project, and asked me to go and have a look at this with him.

I looked at the schematics of the building that was being built, where different sections and different squares for windows or profiles were highlighted in different colours.

To try and understand the traceability of this project, I asked what the different colours meant. It turned out that the different colours didn’t mean anything to the

individuals that were there. If there had been any logic behind the highlighting, it was lost.

When I enquired into the actual frames, they said “this one is definitely gone; it’s highlighted, so it’s definitely not here. We at least know that this is the reason for it being highlighted”. I went outside and scrambled through the raw materials, and found that at least 20% of the profiles that I was looking at that had been highlighted as complete, hadn’t even been fabricated yet.

I went back to have a discussion about the business schematics....and ask could they actually tell anybody where they were up to? Because what I was looking at was a false representation. The whole project management team said that they couldn’t, and that they really didn’t know where they were up to. I asked about the reasons why they hadn’t followed their rules of using the business schematic as a handover tool. And if somebody has then highlighted things that shouldn’t have been highlighted, did they understand why?

The reply I got back was that some shifts hadn’t performed very well at all. In fact, they hadn’t done any work satisfactory and many quality issues had been found at site, then units returned. The schematics however remained highlighted to say that they had been completed. So they had incorrect information in the handovers as well.

Now the consequence of these poor handovers and poorly performing shifts, which then led to poor planning of the business, resulted in a £6 million claim for late opening of the Hotel. And from that point on, for every quarter that it was further going to be delayed, it was going to be another £6 million!

The European director asked me to take over the project and resolve the situation, so I instantly removed every single management position. I asked to reorganize the factory, but they said no, because they were so stressed at getting the building frames out, they did not want anything else to fail.

I decided not to adhere to their order, and re-laid out the factory machinery one night, in the way that I thought would be the most effective and most efficient. Three weeks later the whole project was completed. We produced between 400 – 500% more profiles every single day than they had ever achieved! All the counter claims were averted, including the initial £6 million, because we had managed to turn around the whole project so quickly.

The key point is that this whole thing happened in the first place because of ineffective handovers. Ineffective work handovers had a knock-on effect on the factory, and caused many performance problems internally and externally for the business.

How do you think a handover software solution can aid Project Management and improve organisational effectiveness?

The technological advances in handovers, transition steps or continuity, enables you to put a certain amount of rigour and discipline and exposure around the handover process.

The right information needs to be prepared and delivered to the right person at the right time for them to make use of it. Transparency allows managers to make sure work is progressing consistently. Transparency also allows functional support managers to help the core functions perform. Transparency also ensures by task that internally or external stakeholders are consulted or informed as required.

Also because all the information is stored in an accessible repository, the means are available to aid organisational and individual learning. Repeat mistakes may become a thing of the past.

Objectives, project goals and specific lines of accountability and task completion will not only be enhanced using a handover software solution, but it should also positively assist driving momentum, especially around complex tasks that require lots of collaboration.