

KEYWORDS ■ blended learning ■ project management

Praise youth and it will prosper!

PMI BELGIUM'S RECOGNITION OF YOUNG PM POTENTIAL

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■ ABSTRACT

The yearly award for the best thesis in Project Management as well as the university contest award for the best group assignment of master's students in the Project Management course module at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Ghent University (Belgium) are two ways to get young master's students involved in the professional PM world. The Belgian chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI) wants to collaborate with Ghent University to show the relevance of their activities to the most promising group of project managers, our youngsters and future professionals. This collaboration is highly appreciated by both the professionals and the students, and increases the awareness of the importance on the Project Management discipline for their future career.

INTRODUCTION

There's an old Irish proverb that says "Praise youth and it will prosper", and as a university teacher I cannot agree more. These days, our students are confronted with various ways of learning in their teaching curriculum, and they need to perform better than ever before on various disciplines. In many

course modules, their evaluation is no longer only based on a written exam, but also contains group assignments, company visits, written work and oral defenses. They are therefore no longer solely tested on their knowledge of the topic of a course module, but they have to be able to communicate about it and express their thoughts on a topic in a sound and logical way. Therefore, being a student these days requires a mixed set of skills that results in periods of hard and intense work, and I believe that often, they are not always correctly acknowledged for their accomplishments. For this reason, I had the idea some years ago that we should acknowledge their effort and good outcomes much more than only a final pass mark on an exam, and together with PMI Belgium¹ we introduced two ways to award some of the students for the relevance of their work in a Project Management (PM) course module and/or the novelty of the methodology used to obtain their results. This recognition can help the students realize they are making great progress and sometimes even a difference in the PM community. When young people can make a difference, we have enough reasons to celebrate and praise them for the good work. This article gives a short summary of the praise and the hard work of students since the award initiation in 2011.

1. Praise youth...

The collaboration between the Belgian chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI Belgium) and the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (FEB) from Ghent University in Belgium has resulted in two initiatives to recognize outstanding written work for students

¹ PMI Belgium is a local chapter of the Project Management Institute and can be visited at www.pmi-belgium.be.

following the Project Management course module, now known as the University Contest Award (see section 1.1) and the Master's Thesis Award (see section 1.2).

1.1 University Contest

PMI Belgium's University Contest (UC) is a first initiative between the PMI Belgium and the FEB to recognize the outstanding work of students as part of their final evaluation for the Project Management course module in the Business Engineering program.

The Project Management Institute is the biggest professional organization of project managers worldwide, and its local chapter in Belgium is a successful organization counting more than 1,000 members. Stepping into the professional world while the students are still in their academic life gives them the advantage of learning early in their career how, when and why PMI can be beneficial for them. Moreover, recognition from an organization like PMI Belgium shines brightly on their early CV! The winners of the award are mentioned on the PMI Belgium website, and have the privilege to present their work at a chapter meeting in front of professionals with a great interest in the new ideas but also often with a critical and practical view. Afterwards, the students receive a cash prize to be divided among the group members, and in some occasions, their work is published in professional magazines.

Most students follow the Master's in Operations Management of the Business Engineering programme at the FEB. This master's degree programme focuses on the most relevant topics of Operations Management², which is often referred

² More information on the Master in Operations Management can be found at www.projectmanagement.ugent.be/?q=teaching/om.

to in the literature as Management Science, Business Analytics, Supply Chain Management or Logistics. The two-year programme highlights various business aspects of Operations Management in a learning-by-doing environment and puts forward a well-balanced combination of theoretical lectures, practical business games and case studies, as well as guest lectures and company projects.

The course module "Project Management" of the Master's in Operations Management provides an understanding of key issues and applied methodologies related to Integrated Project Management and Control (Vanhoucke, 2014b). It provides the essential skills a project manager should have when faced with preparing the work necessary for managing and controlling projects in progress. It has a clear focus on integrating scheduling, risk and control to set up a project management and control system using the tools, techniques and best practices available in literature and practice.

The course sessions are given in a flexible and dynamic teaching environment rather than using a traditional ex cathedra teaching style. This style and teaching method is known as blended learning, and includes the use of case studies, business games, software tools, and all other digital techniques available in the classroom. It is an ideal way to design courses that mix different kinds of teaching methods and support material to engage students and bring them closer to the relevance of the course content, thereby stimulating engagement, involvement and even enthusiasm resulting in a better learning experience. For more information about the use of blended learning in the PM course module at the FEB, the reader is referred to Vanhoucke (2014c).

As part of their exam, the students have to solve a self-defined PM problem in groups of 4 to 6 people. The students are aware of this group assignment at the start of the course (*end of September*) and must finalize their work in a written document and an oral presentation when the course sessions end (*mid December*). Consequently, the students have about 12 weeks to solve a PM problem, but experience teaches

that it takes nearly 6 weeks before they really understand the purpose of the group assignment. This is partly due to the fact that they learn the principles and concepts of Project Management throughout the weekly course sessions, and it obviously takes some time before the bigger picture can be seen and understood. A second reason for this delay might be the occurrence of the syndrome that is named after them³. Nevertheless, as in all good classes, many of the students come up with bright ideas and excellent solutions to real PM problems and impress me with the novelty and originality of their work. It is at this point where PMI Belgium comes in and plays a crucial role.

After evaluation of the oral presentation and the written work, the three most innovative and inspiring group reports are submitted to members of PMI Belgium, comprised of not only local professionals from Belgium, but also experts from EVM Europe⁴ living in the US or Australia. From this point on, the final decision lies in the hands of the PMI Belgium jury which will select a winner by focusing on their potential contribution as well as the practical relevance of their written documents, rather than on their academic value. Finally, one group is selected as the winner and the official award is handed out during a PMI Belgium chapter event after an oral presentation of their work to a (*often large*) group of professionals. Needless to say that the most important and interesting part is the reception afterwards, where the students receive their 15 minutes of fame thanks to the positive feedback of most of the professionals and the attention of the local press.

The University Contest winners of the previous years are given along the following lines and a short description of their work is also given:

- Edition 2014: Astrid De Keyzer, Jolien Dobbelaere, Shana Raes, Lisa Vandevoorde and Dorien Van

³ In 1997, Mr. Goldratt reminded us all to the well-known student's syndrome that probably applies to all of us, but the name says that it certainly applies to students. This basically means that despite the time horizon of almost 12 weeks, most of the students do all the work for the group assignment in about 3 to 6 weeks.

⁴ EVM Europe is a professional organization that brings PM researchers and professionals together to share ideas and experiences. For more information, visit www.evm-europe.eu.

Steenberge: "Managing Product Innovation: A study of product innovation in project management"⁵: In this work, the students have analyzed the baseline schedule of a product innovation project in various ways. A detailed analysis of the schedule's sensitivity using scenario analysis as well as a critical analysis of the project's budget (Budget at Completion, BAC) and expected duration (Planned Duration, PD) using Earned Value forecasting has resulted in interesting eye-openers for this type of project.

- Edition 2013: Pearl Debeurme, Sanne Diependaele, Ann-Sophie Parmentier, Julie Scheipers, Hanne Vanaelst and Eline Van Lombeek: "How to Improve Project Team Dynamics: Team Building Workshop"⁶: These students have developed a PM-based learning platform for their colleagues in order to better manage their projects, with a focus on planning of teams and activities, and meeting deadlines. This group assignment is an excellent example of the use of PM concepts and techniques in the daily student life. Since they are constantly confronted with tight deadlines and overlapping group assignments for different courses, they decided to translate the PM concepts into a practical tool.
- Edition 2012: Lien Vehent, M´elanie Decq, Jannig Theeten, Philippe Peelman and Philip Pensaert: "Construction of windmills in Flanders"⁷: Based on project data for the construction of a number of windmills in Maldegem, a small village in Flanders (Belgium), the students have analyzed the progress of the project using Earned Value Management and have adapted and finetuned this well-known technique to better cope with the characteristics of such a complex project.
- Edition 2011: Alexander De Cuyper, Jan Dierckx, Peter Van Vooren and Hristo Petrov: "Impact of methodology and software on the planning of a construction project"⁸: A comparison between a number of software tools (ProTrack, MS Project and FastTrack) is made based on project data from a construction project in Belgium. An analysis of the resource use as well as a detailed risk analysis has resulted in a number of strategies to optimize the time/cost balance of the project.

1.2 Thesis award

A second initiative to recognize the hard and excellent work of university students in Ghent studying in the field of Project Management is to award the best Project Management

- ⁵ Details of the UC 2014 edition can be found at www.or-as.be/blog/universitycontest2014.
- ⁶ Details of the UC 2013 edition can be found at www.or-as.be/blog/universitycontest2013.
- ⁷ Details of the UC 2012 edition can be found at www.or-as.be/blog/universitycontest2012.
- ⁸ Details of the UC 2011 edition can be found at www.or-as.be/blog/universitycontest2011.

Master's Thesis (MT) at the end of their 5 years study. A master's thesis acts as a professional qualification for each Business Engineering student at Ghent University. Each year, the best MT on a Project Management topic, guided by myself as the advisor and one of the team members of the Operations Research and Scheduling (ORE&S) research group as the assistant, is nominated for the best MT Award by PMI Belgium. Unlike the University Contest, where the final decision is made by a PMI Belgium jury, the MT Award selection is based on the judgment of the academic value by the advisor in mutual agreement with PMI Belgium.

The reason for this is that the scope of the written word, and hence the purpose of the MT Award, is fundamentally different from the University Contest award. The UC award requires an excellent PM idea and a relatively short period of hard and intense work, and only the happy few (*one group with maximum 6 people out of a student population close to 200*) get the final award (*even though it is often difficult to choose among a big group of excellent written reports*). The MT Award, on the contrary, nominates the best written work as the result of two years of academic research, and requires much more than an excellent idea. Indeed, while the University Contest puts a clear focus on practical relevance, the MT Award has a more academically oriented focus, and recognizes students' written work with a strong methodological background and contribution to the academic literature.

Despite these fundamental differences (*2 years vs. 12 weeks and an academic vs. practical focus*), the ultimate purpose of the award is identical to the UC nomination: it aims at recognizing the hard work and excellent results of young students early in their career in the hope and belief it will one day prosper, sooner or later. The best MT Award winners of previous editions are:

- Edition 2014: Annelies Martens: "Statistical Project Control"⁹: Since the publication of the research study on project control in Vanhoucke (2010), this research has become an important part of
- ⁹ Details of the MT Award 2014 edition can be found at www.or-as.be/blog/thesisaward2014.

the OR&S group. Not only PhD students, but also master's students test novel ideas and unproven principles on a set of fictitious project data in order to draw general conclusions that can be later used in Ph.D. studies. In this thesis, Annelies has validated the use of multi-variate project control using Earned Value Management and decided to join our group as a Ph.D. student as of October 2014.

- 10 Edition 2012: Pieter Leyman: "A genetic algorithm for the multi-mode resource constrained project scheduling problem with discounted cash flows"¹⁰. Maximizing the net present value is a topic that has been widely investigated in the academic literature, and that always had a central place at the OR&S research group with numerous articles published between 2000 and 2010. In this thesis, the student had to analyze the various algorithms available in literature, and critically review them to finally develop improved procedures that are able to produce faster and better solutions than were known at that time. Up to today, this research process is still under construction as Pieter has joined our research group as a Ph.D. student.
- 11 Edition 2011: Evelyn De Blicke and Ellen De Groote: "An accuracy study on Earned Value Management extensions using Monte-Carlo simulations"¹¹: This thesis expands on the work done in the research published in "Measuring Time" (Vanhoucke, 2010) and tests an extension of the Earned Value Methodology on its merits and its pitfalls for project control. The methodology used was Monte-Carlo simulation programmed in C++. Nowadays, students can simulate project progress data much more easily than was the case at that time since they now have access to test whatever project progress idea in a scripting tool called P2 Engine (Vanhoucke, 2014b). In 2011, these students had to start from an empty computer screen in a C++ compiler, but nevertheless delivered excellent results. 6 months prior to their thesis submission, the students have presented their preliminary results at the EVM Europe workshop event in Ghent (Belgium) in 2010.

2. ...and it will prosper!

Project management is not just about projects and hence a Project Management course module

- 10 Details of the MT Award 2012 edition can be found at www.or-as.be/blog/thesisaward2012_PM.
- 11 Details of the MT Award 2011 edition can be found at www.or-as.be/blog/thesisaward2011.

should be more than a set of tools and techniques. It should also be about people who are willing to share their ideas on the management of projects. Therefore, not only success stories and state-of-the-art case studies are relevant, but various often conflicting points-of-view, coming from professionals, academics and young students, are inspiring. That is why it is so important for students to get involved with PM organizations and why these previously mentioned recognitions have been brought to life. It is our belief that they lead to an increased motivation, that it gives these young people an incentive to step outside their student environment and that it increases their ability to exploit opportunities in the (*near*) future when they start their professional career.

It is difficult to measure the impact of the two initiatives on the motivation and enthusiasm of students, but it is my impression that it is an overall positive stimulus for most of them. Quality of the written work is of the highest standard and the enthusiasm and engagement of most students is excellent. Throughout the years, the adoption of new software tools has gained momentum (*see e.g. more information on the use of PM tools in the book of Vanhoucke (2013)*). Moreover, two of the awarded students have joined the OR&S research group as Ph.D. students¹² and now play an essential role in the further development of the course content and underlying research endeavors.

Perhaps the most impressive and satisfying outcome of the intense relation between students and the PM community was reached at the 5th celebration edition of EVM Europe¹³ in 2013. At that event, 13 master's students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration from Ghent University and 4 Ph.D. students of the

- 12 For more information about the OR&S group members and its activities, the reader is referred to Vanhoucke (2014a) or can visit www.projectmanagement.ugent.be.
- 13 The website of the EVM Europe organization can be visited at www.evm-europe.eu.

OR&S group joined the professionals in a special session on "Young Researchers in Project Management and Control". Their confrontation with the real world and its challenges, and the positive reactions afterwards, were fruitful to both the students and the professionals and undoubtedly elevated the quality of the event, both in terms of speaker quality and content.

3. Conclusion

This article gives an overview of the close collaboration between the faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Ghent University and the Belgian chapter of the Project Management Institute (*PMI Belgium*) in order to give students incentives to get involved with the professional PM community, years before they start their professional career. By awarding written work and involving them in chapter

events and workshops, they get the recognition they deserve. As is the case with all prizes and awards, only a happy few finally get the award and (*cash*) price, while many others also get nominated but do not end on the podium. Nevertheless, it is our belief that this recognition and this process of getting them involved leads to an increased enthusiasm, more engagement and eventually a higher quality of the written and oral work and hence their knowledge and appreciation of the Project Management discipline.

Any help or comments on how to improve our way to praise those young individuals who one day might make a difference in our PM community are most welcome. Even though these youngsters are still students today, there is no doubt they will prosper tomorrow.



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