

# THE ART OF PRODUCTIVE LAZINESS

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## What is productive laziness

*'Progress isn't made by early risers. It's made by lazy men trying to find easier ways to do something.'* Robert Heinlein (1907 - 1988)

By advocating being a 'lazy' project manager, I do not intend that we should all do absolutely nothing. I am not saying we should all sit around drinking coffee, reading a good book and engaging in idle gossip whilst watching the project hours go by and the non-delivered project milestones disappear over the horizon. That would obviously be plain stupid and would result in an extremely short career in project management, in fact probably a very short career full stop!

Lazy does not mean Stupid. No I really mean that we should all adopt a more focused approach to project management and to exercise our efforts where it really matters, rather than rushing around like busy, busy bees involving ourselves in unimportant, non-critical activities that others can better address, or indeed that do not need addressing at all in some cases.

## Science behind the laziness – being focused

The Pareto principle (also known as the 80/20 rule) states that for many phenomena 80% of consequences stem from 20% of the causes. The idea has rule-of-thumb application in many places, but it's also commonly misused, for example, it is a misuse to state that a solution to a problem 'fits the 80-20 rule' just because it fits 80% of the cases; it must be implied that this solution requires only 20% of the resources needed to solve all cases.

The principle was in fact suggested by management thinker Joseph M. Juran and it was named after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, who observed that 80% of property in Italy was owned by 20% of the Italian population. The assumption is that most of the results in any situation are determined by a small number of causes.

So '20% of clients may be responsible for 80% of sales volume'. This can be evaluated and is likely to be roughly right, and can be helpful in future decision-making. The Pareto Principle also applies to a variety of more mundane matters: one might guess approximately that we wear our 20% most favoured clothes about 80% of the time, perhaps we spend 80% of the time with 20% of our acquaintances and so on.

The Pareto Principle or 80/20 rule can and should be used by every smart but lazy person in their daily life. The value of the Pareto Principle for a project manager is that it reminds you to focus on the 20 percent that matters.

Woody Allen once said '80% of success is showing up', I'm not so sure about that, I have seen projects where there was a physical project manager around but you would never have believed that looking at the project progress, or lack of progress.

No, better I believe to appreciate that of the things you do during your day, only 20 percent really matter. Those 20 percent produce 80 percent of your results.

So, you should identify and focus on those things during your working day.

### Science behind the laziness – being smart

It is no good just being lazy; you have to be better than lazy, you have to be lazy in a very smart way.

Productive Laziness is not just about being lazy, it requires something more and that is a powerful and magical combination of laziness and intelligence. Smart lazy people have a real edge over others in society and are most suited to leadership roles in organizations.

This theory has existed for many years and applied in a number of interesting ways. One of the most famous of these was in the Prussian Army.

Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke (1800 – 1891) was a German Generalfeldmarschall. The chief of staff of the Prussian Army for thirty years, he is widely regarded as one of the great strategists of the latter half of the 1800s, and the creator of a new, more modern method, of directing armies in the field.

In 1857 Helmuth Moltke was given the position Chief of the Prussian Großer Generalstab (military staff), a position he held for the next 30 years. As soon as he gained the position, he went to work making changes to the strategic and tactical methods of the Prussian army; changes in armament and in means of communication; changes in the training of staff officers; and changes to the method for the mobilization of the army. He also instituted a formal study of European politics in connection with the plans for campaigns that might become necessary. In short, he rapidly put into place the features of a modern General Staff.

Moltke had a particular insight to and approach to categorising his officer corps, something, which lives on to this day within many armed forces, and something that can apply to all forms of leadership.

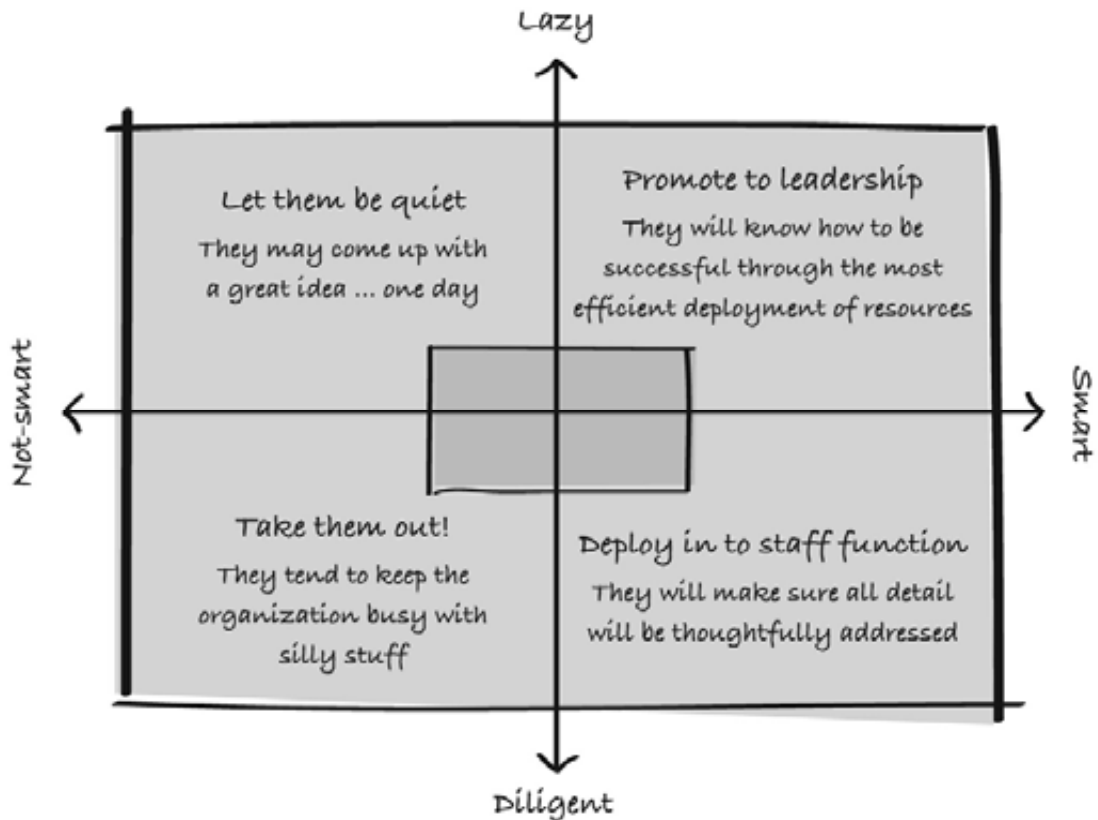
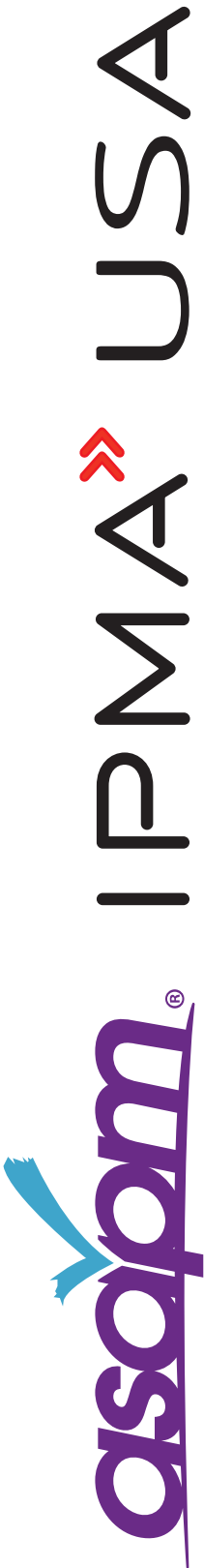


Figure 1, Leadership Analysis Grid



If you consider the two ranges of individual characteristics, those that go from diligent through to lazy, and those that go from non-smart through to smart (yes I am being politically correct here) then you end up with the four character types in the diagram above.

General von Moltke divided his officer corps into these four distinct types, depending on their mental and physical characteristics. He ended up with (and he never had to be politically correct being born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and being chief of the Prussian army) type A: mentally dull and physically lazy, type B: mentally bright and physically energetic, type C: mentally dull and physically energetic, and type D: mentally bright and physically lazy.

Type 'A' officers, who were mentally dull and physically lazy, were given simple, repetitive, and un-challenging tasks to perform. They had reached their career peak in the army. That said, if you left them alone then they might just come up with a good idea one day, if not then they won't cause you any problems either.

Type 'B' officers who were mentally bright and physically energetic were considered to be obsessed with micromanagement and would, as a result, be poor leaders. Promotion was possible over a period of time but not to the status of commanding officer of the German General Staff. These officers were best at making sure orders were carried out and thoughtfully addressing all the detail.

Type 'C' officers who were mentally dull but physically energetic were considered to be somewhat dangerous. To Moltke, they were officers who would require constant supervision, which was an unacceptable overhead and distraction, and because they would potentially create problems faster than could be managed, these officers were considered too much trouble and were dismissed. No career there then!

Which brings us to type 'D' officers; these were the mentally bright and yet physically lazy officers who Moltke felt could and should take the highest levels of command. This type of officer was both smart enough to see what needed to be done but was also motivated by inherent laziness to find the easiest, simplest way to achieve what was required. Put in a more positive way they would know how to be successful through the most efficient deployment of effort.

So, smart lazy people have a real edge over others and are most suited to leadership roles in organizations. The Lazy Project Manager is all about applying these principles in the delivery and management of projects. It is assumed that you are not stupid so you are already on the right-hand side of the diagram, what you now need to do is hone your lazy skills in order to rise to the top right hand side of the diagram. Do this and not only will your projects be more successful, you will also be seen as successful and a safe pair of hands for future leadership roles.

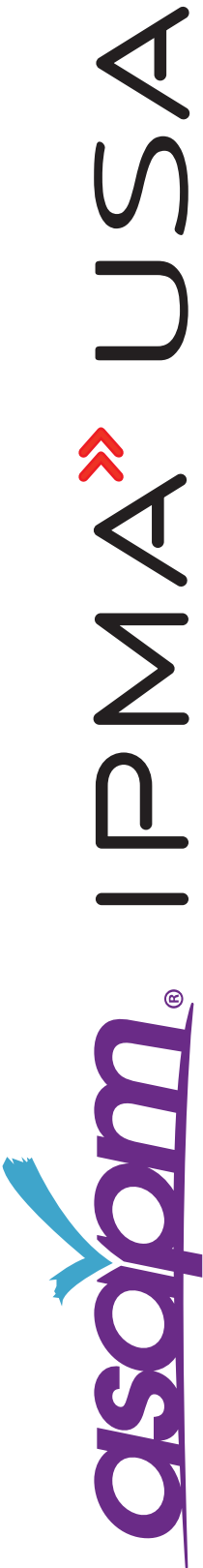
'Whenever there is a hard job to be done I assign it to a lazy man; he is sure to find an easy way of doing it.' - *Walter Chrysler*

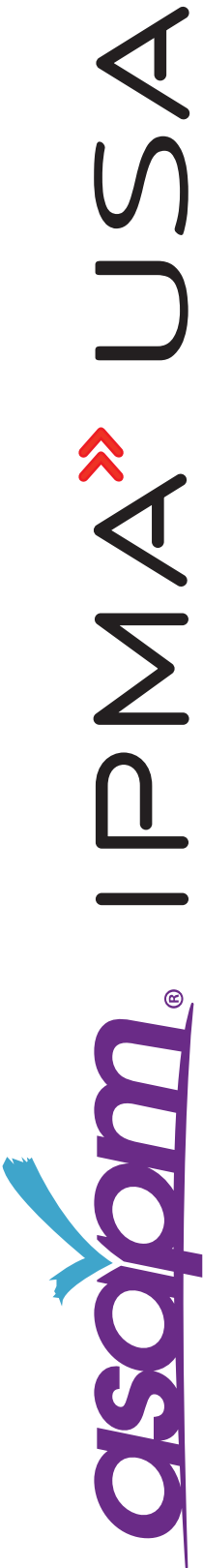
### Applying the 'Productive Lazy' approach to your Sponsor

#### How to control your greatest asset and potentially your biggest threat

Critical to any projects success is having a good project sponsor, but, like the saying goes 'you can pick your friends but you can't pick your relatives' and the same is true of project sponsors.

So what makes a good project sponsor and how do you deal with the one you have just inherited for your project? The Project Sponsor is the key stakeholder representative for the project and provides the necessary support for the Project Manager with the primary responsibility of achievement of the project objectives and benefits. An inappropriate choice of Project Sponsor can seriously impact the possibility of success of the project and provide you, the project manager, with an unwanted additional overhead.





Now you can't practically ask a sponsor for their CV<sup>1</sup> and put them through a formal interview process, nice as it would be sometimes to utter the phrase 'I'm sorry but I just don't think that this is the job for you right now'. But you should evaluate the sponsor you have and complete, in a subtle way of course, a 'Strengths and Weaknesses' assessment so that you can adapt your project approach and communication methods to maximise their sponsorship support for the project that you now manage.

You can also openly discuss your intended plans for project management and communication to ensure that they fully buy-in to what you intend and how you intend to achieve it. Responsibilities for project sponsors typically include:

- Providing direction and guidance for strategies and initiatives
- Negotiate funding for the project
- Actively participating in the initial project planning
- Identifying project Steering Committee members
- Working with the Project Manager to develop the Project Charter
- Identifying and quantifying business benefits to be achieved by successful implementation of the project
- Reviewing and approving changes to plans, priorities, deliverables, schedule, etc.
- Gaining agreement amongst the stakeholders when differences of opinion occur
- Assisting the project when required (especially in an 'out-of-control' situation) by exerting their organizational authority and ability to influence
- Assisting with the resolution of inter-project boundary issues
- Chairing the Project Steering Committee
- Supporting the Project Manager in conflict resolution
- Make the project visible in the organisation
- Encouraging stakeholder involvement and building and maintaining their ongoing commitment through effective communication strategies
- Advising the Project Manager of protocols, political issues, potential sensitivities, etc.
- Evaluating the project's success on completion.

The Project Sponsor should be a senior manager having the financial and organisational power to act quickly and decisively in the overall governance of the project. It is an active, hands-on role, requiring a supportive working relationship with the Project Manager and effective communication with major stakeholders. The Project Sponsor should have a broad knowledge of the business including experience and expertise in the functional areas addressed by the project.

#### **Ask them what they expect**

It is important to get the project off to a good start and build a strong relationship with the project sponsor. Don't take any secondhand statements, references, quotes or rumours to be the truth of the project sponsor's views and expectations. Ask them. Clarify directly and take only their word for what it is they want and expect.

Now it may well be possible that the sponsor may not yet know what they expect. It may be that this is their first time as a project sponsor and the role is as new to them as the project sponsor is to you. If that is the case, you need to help them and guide them in the responsibilities that they may have.

Either way, consider your first meeting with the sponsor, new or not so new to the role, known or unknown to you from previous projects. What would be reasonable to cover in such a meeting?

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<sup>1</sup> A résumé, also spelled resumé or resume; also called curriculum vitae or CV, is a document that contains a summary or listing of relevant job experience and education. The résumé or CV is typically the first item that a potential employer encounters regarding the job seeker and is typically used to screen applicants, often followed by an interview, when seeking employment.

I joked that you couldn't practically ask a sponsor for their credentials for this job and put them through a formal interview process. Indeed, more often than not the project sponsor has been chosen by the business well before you have even been selected as the project manager. But let's just assume that you can interview them, this could be fun.

'Tell me why you think you are the right person for this job?' – Well, what skills are you looking for in a good project sponsor?

'What strengths will you bring to the role?' – What are the strengths that would make your life as a project manager that much easier?

'What are your points of weakness and what actions will you take to address these issues?' – What weaknesses are you looking to avoid at all costs?

### **Manage the first meeting**

In preparing for that first meeting (interview) with your sponsor you will need to understand that some sponsors will have a very fixed vision for the project and will tell you, and the rest of the project team, exactly what they want, when they want it, and what will happen if they don't get what they want. Be cautious with these sponsors, their strength of purpose and character may challenge your interviewing skills. But it is still essential that you end up with the clarity of purpose that you need to run this project and work closely with the project sponsor.

Other project sponsors may have a vision that appears to be an undefined conceptual possibility developed with a small dose of delusion and aided (allegedly) with hint of illegal substance abuse.

Ok then, so your sponsor will be somewhere between the above extremes (if you are lucky). What should you be asking them?

### **Ask the questions you need to ask**

Well consider the following key topics; business objective(s), anticipated impact of the project deliverables, expected quality standards, significant risks seen at this stage, key dates on the project horizon, key stakeholders (beyond yourself and the project sponsor), and any budgetary constraints that are likely. In addition, you need to learn what style of communication and relationship this particular sponsor expects from you.

First impressions really count so do your preparation well. If you conduct a good, professional, confident, first meeting with your project sponsor you will not only demonstrate your capability in a good light, but you will also provide a valuable service to the sponsor.

### **Open discussion works**

'Tell me about the project we have'. Feel free to start the conversation in a simple way, with an open question, and then follow up with other questions that you need to ask in order to reach a suitable level of confidence in your understanding of those key topics. Those topics include business objective(s), anticipated impact of the project deliverables, quality standards, significant risks seen at this stage, key dates on the project horizon, key stakeholders and budgetary constraints.

One tip here, you are only on an information gathering exercise right now. I know I said take the project with a firm hand from day one, but as far as the project sponsor is concerned I would advise being a little gentle to begin with, at least until you understand what type of sponsor you are dealing with. You can put your firm grip in place and negotiate hard later on, right now just learn and inwardly digest what you are told.

OK, now you need to go ahead and ‘interview’ the project sponsor. But what happens if they fail the interview? Consider first if remedial work can be put in place to help them ‘raise their game’. Alternatively, can you fill any deficiencies that you identify – either by process or resources? If the failure is so significant this will be a real project risk. I guess now only two options remain – this project ain’t big enough for the both you, and one of you is gonna have to leave town.

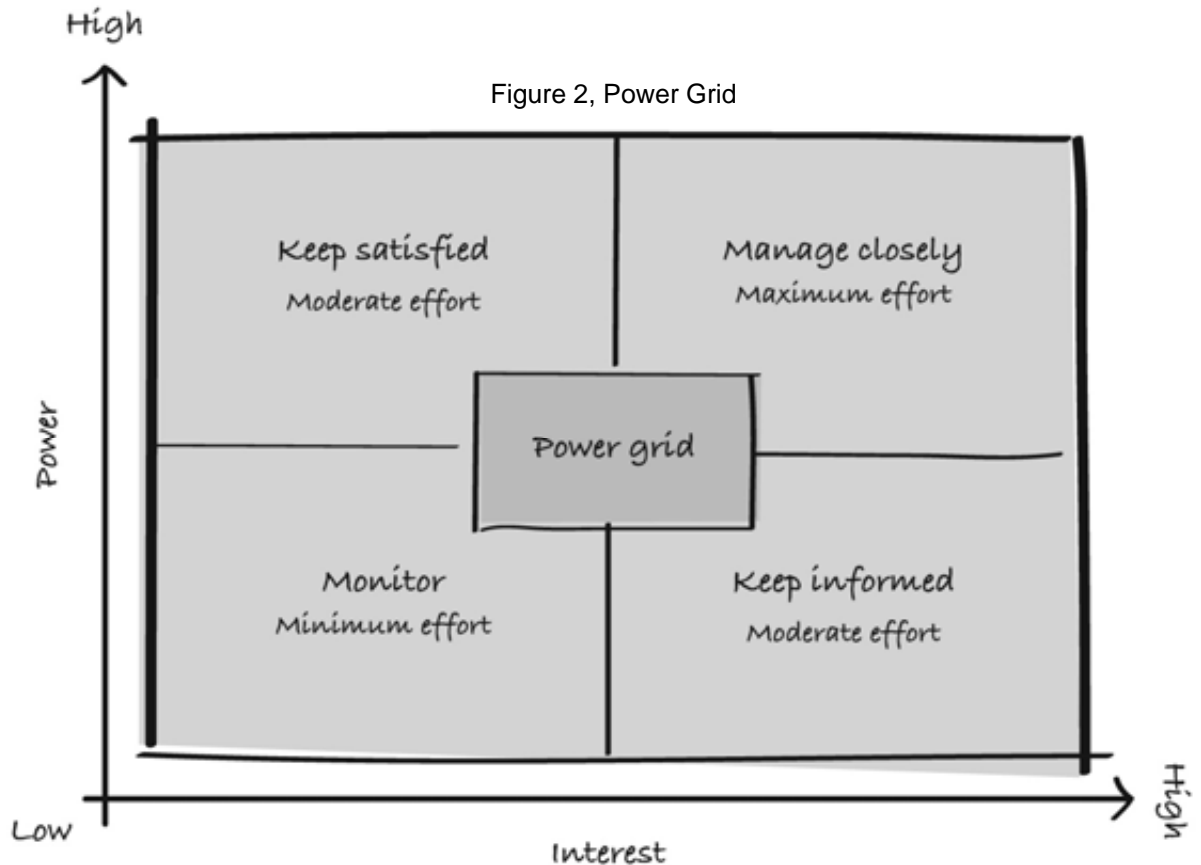
Once the interview is out of the way, maybe you can check their references, or maybe the next step is to get them to complete a psychometric test.

Here’s one simple test you could try, just to help you filter out the extreme cases! The question may or may not help with profiling your project sponsor but at the very least it is great fun at a project team social gathering.

*A young woman<sup>2</sup> goes to the funeral of her mother. There she meets a man whom she has never met before. She identifies him as the man of her dreams and immediately falls in love with him. She has no idea who he is and no-one at the funeral has ever met him before or who knows who he is. Two weeks later she kills her sister. Why?*

**Apply the power grid**

But let’s not be pessimistic, that isn’t going to happen to you, you won’t get an extreme case of project sponsor and they won’t fail the ‘interview’. So, what is your next move? Well perhaps you should consider the power base that your project sponsor has. Use the power grid below to assess your project sponsor, assess their rating of interest in this project from high to low and their actual power in the organisation, also from high to low.



<sup>2</sup> It does not have to be a woman; gender plays no role in this question or in the answer.

This will give you an indication of the way in which you should work with them.

Actually, this power grid is for all project stakeholders and if you end up with a project sponsor that is in the 'low interest' and 'low power' quadrant you really have a problem. It is unlikely that this sponsor is ever going to support your management endeavours.

### Types of power that count

Again, for all stakeholders, but in particular for project sponsors, you need to be aware that there are a number of types of power that can be present in any organization.

Where does your project sponsor fit?

- Legitimate— This can be through a formal title or position (authority)
- Reward— This can be through an ability to provide positive consequences on people (carrot)
- Coercive— This can be through the ability to provide negative consequences (stick)
- Purse String— This can be through budget control (money)
- Bureaucratic— This can be through knowledge of the 'system' (intelligence)
- Referent— This can be through association with someone else's power (network)
- Technical— This can be through technical knowledge relating to the project (skill)
- Charismatic— This can be through personality alone (character)

Can you categorise your sponsor? Probably they will have more than one of the above list that will apply, and that is a good thing.

### Discover what's in it for them?

Finally you need to understand what 'is in it for them' – what their previous experience as a sponsor has been (both in their knowledge of being a sponsor and of real project experience i.e. was a previous project a nightmare project?) if that is appropriate. Even if they have never 'sponsored' before they will, no doubt, have an opinion based upon stories they have heard from projects in the past.

### And finally

And 'what's in it for you' is the ability to work in that desired 'Productive Lazy' management style but still deliver for your sponsor. Manage your sponsor well and they will be your ally in the coming weeks and months.

### And now the answer to the question:

*A young woman goes to the funeral of her mother. There she meets a man whom she has never met before. She identifies him as the man of her dreams and immediately falls in love with him. She has no idea who he is and no-one at the funeral has ever met him before or who knows who he is. Two weeks later she kills her sister. Why?*

Well, if you think in a very particular way, a way that indicates some potential as a psychopath allegedly, then she killed her sister in the hope that the mysterious stranger at her mother's funeral would also attend the sister's funeral as well since the only connection seems to be with the family and therefore by creating another critical family event she may well see him again.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I have only come across three people so far who have answered this question correctly (or incorrectly depending upon your view of life). These people each answered almost instantly with the answer above and were amazed that no one else could see the puzzle solution. Wor- ryingly, one of these is my wife.

### About the Author

Despite his title of 'The Lazy Project Manager', Peter Taylor is in fact a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in project management, program management and the professional development of project managers. He has done so latterly as Head of Projects at a global supplier of performance system solutions, and currently as Director of a PMO at Siemens PLM Software, a global supplier of product lifecycle management solutions. He is an accomplished communicator and leader; always adopting a proactive and business-focused approach.



He is also the author of 'The Lazy Project Manager' book (Infinite Ideas 2009) – for more information - [www.thelazyprojectmanager.com](http://www.thelazyprojectmanager.com)

You can also subscribe to a series of free podcasts on iTunes (The Lazy Project Manager).