

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Room for growth in Irish market

The public sector hasn't moved with the times in project management – and it shows, says the chief of leading consultancy PMG. Margaret O'Brien reports

It is 20 years since multinationals decided to cut back on their internal engineering departments, and spawned the business of outsourced project management.

Pat McGrath, chief executive of leading Irish consultancy Project Management Group (PMG), said that growth within the sector in Ireland lagged behind that in the United States.

But there has been a significant increase in business in recent years, driven by the private sector, he said.

McGrath's company employs more than 1,200 people in Ireland, Poland, Russia, Romania, Belgium Britain and the US.

PMG provides project management, engineering design and construction management services across a range of sectors, with a focus on the bio-pharmaceutical and medical technology sectors.

"We work with all the big name multinationals in these sectors, including, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson and Abbott," he said. "We have a tremendous track record dealing with complex bio-pharmaceutical sector projects."

"We are currently designing and project managing a major bio-technology facility in Belgium and are working on a number of complex projects in Moscow."

While PMG has a speciality, it is also flexible.

"We have certain skills in-house that are transferable across sectors – as evidenced by our current role as project manager of the new Lansdowne Road stadium," said McGrath.

The need for project management consultancy is driven primarily by complex, large-scale projects that call for specific skills.

"We have moved into the era of large-scale international projects. Key to our own company's growth is that we can offer project management services in any part of Europe at the drop of a hat," said McGrath.

"We have also pushed the geographical boundaries by completing projects as far away as the US, Singapore and Shanghai."

McGrath is critical of the public sector's tardiness in embracing project management.

"Certain parts of our public service sector still use a very traditional approach – they haven't moved with the times," he said.

"The private sector thinks in days and hours in terms of meeting project deadlines – regardless of the size and complexity of that project – whereas the public sector thinks in terms of weeks and months."

"There would seem to be



Pat McGrath, chief executive, Project Management Group: 'The private sector thinks in days and hours in terms of meeting project deadlines'

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greater flexibility with public sector deadlines.

"We agonise if we think we are going a day or two over on a two-year project – yet you regularly hear about public sector projects that run way over time. Equally, when we are asked for a budget, that's it. We can't go back to a multinational company and ask for more funding midstream."

"Once we take on a job the budget becomes our responsibility."

In his view, private sector procurement has proved faster

than public sector or traditional procurement.

"That's why the public sector needs to adopt some of the methodology employed by the private sector," he said.

McGrath said that the biggest enemy of good project management was change in plans.

"If the timescale and budget on a project is vague, it is hardly a surprise if it runs over. Projects need to be defined clearly from the outset, in the interests of greater efficiency."

"The language of engineering is English, so it isn't usually a problem," he said.

In developing countries, the public sector has been swift to adopt the skills of established project management consultancies, McGrath said. PMG is currently working on infrastructural projects in Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria.

PMG employs both Irish and foreign professionals. McGrath does not see language or communication on overseas projects as a barrier.

"The language of engineering is English, so it isn't usually a problem," he said.

"However, to be a European player we need to represent diversity within our workforce. That's why, for example, in our Polish office we employ mostly Polish staff."

"This also makes economic sense – it is less expensive to employ local experts than to relocate a lot of our Irish workforce, which in turn allows us to compete."

Only a few project management firms in Ireland are large enough to have all architectural and engineering disciplines in-house, but this is an interna-

tional trend, said McGrath.

"Such firms in the US are called 'A&E firms,'" he said.

"These one-stop-shop firms, such as ourselves, can successfully undertake large, complex and fast-track projects with all members of the design and project management team working under one roof in a 'taskforce'."

"This simplifies inter-discipline co-ordination, which is often compromised by different teams working on different disciplines in different offices."

As projects grow in size and complexity in this country, we will see more focus on the project management approach, McGrath predicts.

"We will probably see specialist project management firms and traditional design firms amalgamating to offer the A&E or one-stop-shop approach."

"If not, overseas firms will quickly see the opportunities – as many already have – and will enter the Irish market to give the clients here what they need."