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Limits to professional Project Management

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Abstract

This paper considers some of the factors influencing the development of professional project management. Some important limiting factors are identified. It is intended thereby that:

- A more realistic context will be used for developing the profession
- Plans for the profession's development will be more robust
- The global cost-benefit of project management will be enhanced

The content derives from extensive relevant personal experience as well as from wide reading of relevant texts. The topic is broken down into four main elements: external, internal, inherent and future.

The paper is designed for presentation rather than as an academic record of research, although reference is made to previous publications.

Although trends and limits are suggested, no firm conclusion is drawn. Rather, further consideration along similar lines is proposed.

Keywords: professional, constraints, project management, future.

Keywords

Project management, Mediterranean, Conference, Greece

1. Introduction

This paper derives from lengthy involvement by the author in professional organisations in the UK. I am a chartered professional member of two organizations and am a non-chartered member of other professional organisations. In addition I have been involved in many of the activities preparing the premier UK project management organisation, APM, for chartered status, a step that will significantly raise the professional standing of project management in the UK. I have also taken a leading role in the development of national project management qualifications for the UK.

Although it takes therefore a UK centric view the paper is informed by experience of managing projects and teaching project management to a variety of curricula internationally including in countries bordering the Mediterranean, as well as by wide reading on the topic.

2. External context

Ur in Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, is often called the oldest city in the world. Dating back some 5,500 years it is full of projects such as ziggurats, temples, elaborate burial chambers and drainage works. Minoan civilization here in Crete emerged about the same time and we will all I hope learn more of their masterful, and seemingly more peaceful projects, whilst we are guests on this island.

The great pyramid at Giza in Egypt is younger at about 4,700 years old. Its construction is supposed to have required some 130,000 workers over the full 23 year reign of its creator Cheops. Did this need project managing? Even more demanding was the creation of the Ajanta Caves in India filled with exquisite craftsmanship. Said to be the greatest project in the history of the World, these were started about 2000 years ago and took some 500 years to build. Were professional project managers used? Jet Magsaysay, (July 1999)

In the UK we have Stonehenge, one of the most recognised monuments in the World. This dates back 4,000 years when stones weighing over 45 tons were erected and some brought from 385km away. Earthworks around the same site are much earlier, with one long barrow burial mound dated as from 6,000 years ago. Clearly long distance and astronomical surveying was an important part of the skills required at the time. Were these surveyors also the early project managers?

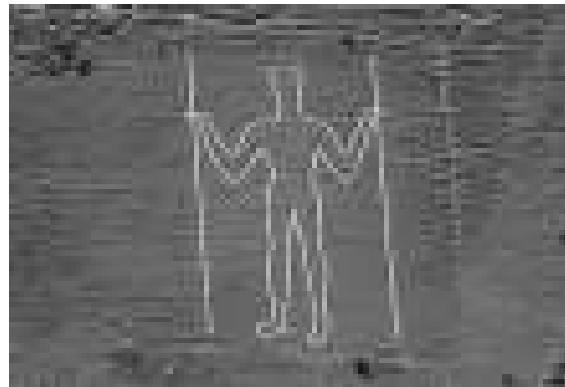


Figure 3 The Long man of Wilmington, Sussex, UK

Is this 70 metre high figure cut into the chalk hillside at Wilmington, Sussex, said by some to be a surveyor in fact the first representation of a professional project manager?

Proceeding from this ancient speculation we arrive at 1680 CE. According to the first English novelist, Daniel Defoe, this is the year of the "birth of the monster" of projecting humour. He admits that no age has been altogether without something of this nature but considers this date as the start of a new type of enterprise. He is more polite elsewhere in the referenced text, saying that "about 1680 began the art and mystery of projecting to creep into the world." Defoe, Daniel, (1697).



Figure 4 Daniel Defoe, 1659 – 1731

Incidentally, Defoe also characterises the building of the tower of Babel as complying with the true definition of a project, ie a vast undertaking, too big to be managed, and therefore likely enough to come to nothing. He also says of unsuccessful projects what we have often heard since "it only miscarried, or else it would have succeeded" a view which professionalism is surely trying to make obsolete.

Over the centuries we have seen great projects undertaken successfully with no public recognition of unique separate qualities required of their managers. In such fields as military fortifications and civil engineering these management skills were considered part of the primary profession.

This raises a current issue. How can professionalism of project management be harmonised between those seeking it primarily as a portable trans-sector skill and those who intend to practice purely within one application area, such as IT or construction? In this latter group we can list relevant professional organisations with project management subgroups in surveying, engineering, architecture and computing. We should note also that a programme and project management Diploma qualification is offered by the UK Chartered Institute of Management, and that this can help towards achievement of Chartered Manager status.

Interestingly the UK Government issued in 2003 the National Occupational Standards for Project Management which is cross-sectoral and provides the basis for qualifications from about Diploma level to Masters level. APM was directly involved in this initiative as were some of their senior members. ECITB (2003)

3. Internal

Within the project management discipline we have the well known players such as IPMA, PMI and powerful country specific agencies such as the UK's Office of Government Commerce who issue their own standards as well of course as national

project management organizations such as PM-Greece. In the last few decades considerable progress has been made towards professionalisation. The number of project managers worldwide certificated to either PMI or IPMA standards in 2007 was considered as 325,000. Chritophe Bredillet and others (2010)

From IPMA, the ICB sets out the knowledge and experience expected from the managers of projects, programmes and project portfolios. It contains basic terms, practices, methods and tools for professional project management, as well as specialist knowledge and experience. IPMA (2010). The baseline competences are allocated under three headings: technical, behavioural and contextual. These are then used to define four levels of project management competence to which some 90,000 people are now certificated according to the IPMA, 2009 4th Quarter Newsletter.



Figure 5 IPMA PM certification levels

This certification pattern is followed by most member associations including by APM in the UK.

Progress to highest professional status for a profession may be said to follow five steps which could well take more than 10 years. These are:

1. Organised – a recognised community of practitioners
2. Qualified – a qualification regime applies
3. Governed – the field is governed by a framework of institutions
4. Public – the profession meets its public obligations
5. Statutory – the profession is regulated by law for the benefit of the public

As part of its strong push up this progression of increasing professionalism the APM has defined five dimensions of professionalism as the focus for much of its effort. Association for Project Management, (2010) These are:

Breadth

The APM Body of Knowledge defines the knowledge needed to manage any kind of project. It underpins many project management standards and methods including the National Occupational Standard in Project Management.

Depth

The APM Competence Framework provides a guide to project management competences. It is part of your professional toolkit; mapping levels of knowledge

and experience to help you progress your skills and abilities. It is linked to the APM Body of Knowledge 5th edition and the International Project Management Association (IPMA) - International Competence Baseline (ICB v3.0). APM (2008)

Achievement

APM qualifications take your career in new and exciting directions. They are recognised across the profession and aligned with IPMA's 4 level Certification Program.

Commitment

Continuing Professional Development helps develop your project management practice. A targeted development plan will enhance your project management career.

Accountability

The APM Code of Professional Conduct outlines the ethical practice expected of a professional. Becoming an APM member shows your commitment to the Code and sets you apart from others.

It should be noted in relation to sector specific project management that APM, with 17,500 individual members has formal relationships with such organisations as the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. One of the RICS's faculties is Project Management in the built environment which has 30,000 members, albeit these can opt for up to four faculties each.

Professionalism standards are difficult to transfer internationally. For example, recent research highlights differences in behaviour between two European countries, The Netherlands and France. The Dutch culture, focusing on consensus as a decision making process, is contrasted with the French *métier* culture, focusing on the quality of the result rather than on process control. The referenced paper explores how this difference impacts on project management practice. Jaqueline de Bony. (2010) Increasing professionalism globally must therefore pay full regard to national cultural differences.

Of significance in the issue of the penetration of project management in any society is the number of qualified project managers. This has been analysed for 2007 by country in relation to various measures including GDP. Greece is among the High-GDP countries for which correlations of project management deployment, ie the ratio of the number of qualified project managers to the population is negatively related to Hofstede's power distance and uncertainty avoidance scores. On power distance Greece scores 60 in a range of 11 (Austria) to 104 (Malaysia and Slovakia) whilst on the uncertainty avoidance measure Greece has the highest score of 112 in a range of 8 (Singapore) to 112. Other cultural variables, such as individualism and masculinity/femininity were found to be not significantly correlated. The conclusion of this paper also is that project management deployment policy in a country should take into consideration the correct cultural dimensions. Despite the high Greek uncertainty avoidance score, it would still seem that Greece had then considerable potential to increase its certified project management deployment. If it were to achieve the same penetration as say Portugal the number of certified project managers would increase sixfold. Chritophe Bredillet and others (2010)

Related research has examined the use of standards in project management covering process standards as well as competence standards. This finds that

standards are rarely used in project management organisations. Where used it is mainly to harmonise terminology. They are seldom used as an unmodified template but more often applied in part or as a pool of ideas. Major problems are that their implementation leads to too high costs and the lack of acceptance amongst practitioners. Professional standards will therefore need to be user friendly and be well marketed to the user community. Frederik Ahlemann and others (2009).

4. Inherent

An important point regarding professionalism is the difference between membership of a professional body and being a registered professional. Some professional bodies do not maintain a register of professionals with particular competences, merely keeping a list of members fulfilling the core requirements.

Typical activities of a professional body are:

- Define the core body of knowledge
- Define route to professional status
- Certify organisations as well as individuals using assessment panels
- Re-accreditation practitioners, typically using a continuous personal development process
- Serve the public as well as members
- Ensure free and open competition in the practice of the profession
- Protect the independence of practitioners
- Educate practitioners' customers
- Comply with a governance process to maintain and govern standards
- Apply a research capacity to develop the Body of Knowledge, standards, qualification and best practice in the light of changes such as in technology and regulations
- Maintain and enforce codes of conduct
- Approve education and training products
- Cooperate with relevant organisations nationally and internationally
- Provide leadership and obtain recognition as representative of their profession.

One difficulty to be addressed in relation to project management is the variety of roles and specialisations in the profession. This includes project team member, project manager, project sponsor, projects director, PMO manager and risk management, procurement, earned value, planning and cost control. Any comprehensive certification system should allow for recognition of these roles and subjects as well as for differing grades of programme and project manager.

Another feature of project management, as for any management qualification, is the distinction between personal based competence and functional competence. This may also be described as the difference between task behaviour and contextual behaviour. The latter which is difficult to measure directly may account for some 30% of the variance in managerial performance. Divine Kwaku Ahadzie and others (2008). These attributes of competency have some similarity with Machiavelli's use of the terms Virtù as examined by Miles Shepherd (2006).

All good schemes of professionalism require the use of codes of conduct and ethical behaviour. However it should be recognised that there are major difficulties in applying codes where the country concerned suffers from poor governance standards. In this respect the Global Governance Index is relevant. This takes into account for each country measures of:

- Voice and Accountability
- Political Stability and Absence of Violence
- Government Effectiveness
- Regulatory Quality
- Rule of Law
- Control of Corruption

There is little progress that one emerging profession can achieve in a context that is hostile to professional behaviour.

5. Future

Even after taking into account the various considerations and constraints noted above, planners for greater professionalisation of project management should consider future uncertainties. As project managers we often need to test our models of long term projects against future scenarios. Substantial further professionalisation of project management requires a time horizon of at least 10 years. Some of the uncertainties likely to arise over this timescale are noted below.

- Project management taught to secondary level at all schools.
- Project management becomes the major subset of general management.
- Operational business is increasingly seen as just a phase of a longer project.
- What are now considered complex project management procedures and calculations become widely understood and available to non specialists. Note that Tom Peters, the well known management thinker, is quoted as saying one hundred percent of everyone's' time should be taken up by projects. Jet Magsaysay (1999)
- The common project management concepts and terminology as used in ICB and PMBoK are superseded by substantially different multi-cultural and language variations, for example in non-Indo European languages.
- Artificial intelligence replaces much project management decision making.
- Widely adopted cultural change to simple sustainability with few major projects, many of these focused on low impact technology.
- Inter-country cooperation breaks down with few effective international institutions.
- Nations and international agencies no longer form the basis of cooperation and conflict which are instead based on widespread groups not linked to countries.
- Military force becomes the major agent of change.
- Disaster and disease lead to a major reduction in world population.

Any plans for increased professionalisation should be tested against scenarios additional to ones that are either stay-as-you-are or just more-of-the-same. These additional scenarios should take account of such factors as those listed above.

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