



Projects as creators of the preconditions for standardized and routinized operations in use

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Abstract

The purpose of a project is to create the *preconditions* for other activities. Yet the main focus of project research and much of practice is on the project itself, namely project characteristics and the means to execute projects. This conceptual paper addresses the purpose, and specifically creating the preconditions for other activities in use; an overlooked issue in research and practice. The delivery of valuable projects that fulfil their purpose is central to a thriving economy and society, and therefore creating the preconditions requires a great deal more attention.

Project provision cannot be compared with other standardized production and routinized service activities. Indeed, the standardization and routinization of other activities is made possible by the delivery and value realization of projects once put to use for sponsors, owners and end-users.

Preconditions come in several forms. An initial and indicative taxonomy of six categories of preconditions are proposed. The taxonomy provides a basis for understanding the preconditions as a first step for more detailed assessment of delivering projects with valuable outcomes. Such an approach links to other theoretical lenses, such as learning, service design and the service-dominant logic, to provide the conceptual means to evaluate creating the preconditions for other activities.

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1. Introduction

What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other? George Eliot.

This conceptual paper aims to address our understanding of the project. It is argued that the prime purpose of a project is to create the *preconditions* for other standardized and routinized activities. Therefore, projects cannot be subjected to the same criteria as many other types of provision, such as performance and productivity comparisons, and success measurements. This is precisely because other operations utilize the preconditions created by projects to establish standardized and routinized

activities to ensure consistent and replicable performance and outcomes. *Preconditions* are defined here as establishing the optimal provision of value for realization in use and context where standardization and routinization do *not* currently exist. Activities is defined here as being the range of tasks and processes that are part of operations that engage with the projects post-completion. Routinization provides the means to articulate processes on the ground. If the processes are standard ones they are used time and again. The outcomes are easy to secure through replication where the routines support replication and replication renders the activities standardized ones. The operations in this context refers not to project management but to the application of the project post-delivery, that is, when it is put to use or is in use.

Building on the aim to improve our understanding of projects, the research looks at projects in terms of their future

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functioning (Bredillet, 2004a; Söderlund, 2004), indeed, embody the future in the sense of the purpose of the project and fulfilling that purpose (cf. van der Hoorn and Whitty, 2015). The paper specifically looks at the contribution projects make to society by creating the preconditions for other activities in use, which has largely been overlooked in research and project management practice. The delivery of valuable projects that fulfil their purpose is central to a thriving economy and society, and therefore creating the preconditions requires a great deal more attention. Yet, drawing on prior research, the paper can be seen as an extension of and challenge to predominant positivist and linear paradigms of project management and theorization (e.g. Pollack, 2007; Cicmil et al., 2006; Smyth and Morris, 2007). The understanding of projects and the activity of the management of projects remains a work in progress (Morris, 2013). Consideration of projects post-completion and linking this back to establishing the preconditions through execution, from which others subsequently benefit, is an unfinished research task.

1.1. Background and the recent historical context

Project and project management research has in the past paid particular attention to project execution and the management of projects (e.g. Morris, 1994; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007a; Turner, 2009). Part of that consideration has involved examining the *characteristics of the project* and its organization (e.g. Songer and Molenaar, 1997; Andersen, 2003; Andersen et al., 2009; Winch, 2010). The project is characterized as a unique and complex endeavour with high levels of uncertainty (e.g. Pich et al., 2002; Winch, 2010; Geraldi et al., 2011). The project is further characterized as a temporary activity, whereby execution takes place within a defined timeframe by a temporary organization (e.g. Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Packendorff, 1995; Sydow et al., 2004; Bakker et al., 2016). The project team and broader coalition are mobilized accordingly and in the project's operational context. The project team typically comprises membership that is temporary in a multi-organizational configuration and in personnel (e.g. Cherns and Bryant, 1884; Winch, 2010).

The in-house or project-based firm's management allocates resources. The project management team mobilizes resources to configure the inputs to meet the requirements and execution takes place against the iron triangle, which embodies the three main elements of a range of factors that can be termed the *management of means*. These means of execution do not directly address the organizational problem that the project is trying to solve for the client as owner and sponsor and for the end-users (e.g. Atkinson, 1999). These traditional criteria of requirements execution are, therefore, means and not the ends; they do not directly address the project purpose.

There have been efforts to go beyond these narrow criteria in order to consider benefits delivery (e.g. Shenhar et al., 1997; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007a; Morris, 2013), which is defined as coming from the outputs yet prior to the value realization from the project (Ashurst and Doherty, 2003; Ward et al., 2007) and project impact, which is both less tangible and sums up the

result of value realization (e.g. Morris, 2013). Benefits delivery tends to assess the translation of inputs into outputs, thus, how effectively performance has met the requirements and client expectations. This in turn feeds into consideration of performance and the broader consideration of project success criteria (e.g. Shenhar et al., 1997; Cooke-Davies, 2002). This view holds that project success criteria are about inputs in order to seek certain outputs. Benchmarks and other indicators are generally confined to outputs, while cost-benefit analysis tends to focus more on outputs (value) in relation to resource inputs (costs). However, the project outcomes in use and context are seldom and sparsely addressed. The value realized from projects by the client and direct stakeholders as owner, sponsor and users are a largely unexplored area in terms of the usefulness of the projects over the long run; the extent to which they contribute directly and indirectly to well-being, wealth creation and profitability. Overlooking the value realized is common in research and practice.

1.2. Foreground and current developments

The strictures of the linear positivist epistemology have been discarded through a considerable body of academic research (e.g. Bredillet, 2004b; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006), in turn challenging the practitioner models and bodies of knowledge (e.g. Smyth and Morris, 2007).

Other approaches have emerged that embrace the project as a process and living experience (e.g. Cicmil et al., 2006; van der Hoorn and Whitty, 2015). Others considered project outcomes (e.g. Liu and Walker, 1998), in particular the co-created value in use by applying the theoretical lens of the service-dominant logic (e.g. Wikström et al., 2009; Kujala et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2014; Razmdoost and Mills, 2016). This perceptual and phenomenological approach has built on the seminal work of Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2016). Although there are considerable challenges regarding value outcomes for research and application in practice (e.g. Smyth et al., 2016), the service-dominant logic provides one theoretical lens to help show the extent to which the project purpose is met. There are multiple conceptualizations regarding value and projects even from the co-creation perspective (other examples to those cited above include: Arto et al., 2016; Peltokorpi et al., 2016; Keeys and Huemann, 2017; Laursen, 2017). There are several other current lenses that are pointed to during the paper, namely learning and knowledge management and service design, as well as the service-dominant logic, however, there may be other current lenses and new ones should be expected as part of theory development that can be applied to understand better both the creation of appropriate preconditions and serving the project purpose. Purpose is defined through this lens in terms of the realized value in use and context, however, value itself is variable and includes profit, cultural, policy and social outcomes that are both measurable and perceptual (Smyth et al., 2016).

There are other theoretical lenses, for example service design, which try to align the service produced to the needs of the procurer and users (e.g. Romme, 2003). This lens is important for envisioning the project in meeting its purpose (cf. Shostack, 1984) and then mapping the service to align

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