



Do project managers have different perspectives on project management?

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Abstract

Do all project managers have the same perspective on project management? This paper argues that project management may be seen from different perspectives. The task perspective means that the project manager focuses on delivering on time, within budget and with specified quality. The organizational perspective implies that the project manager's focus is to support value creation in the receiving organization. The conducted survey reveals that different perspectives prevail among project managers. The implications are of importance. Every project has to decide at the outset which project management perspective shall rule the work of the project.

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1. Introduction

Do all project managers see project management in the same way? In this paper, we will investigate whether all project managers have the same perspective on project management. We will discuss the consequences of different perspectives.

By discussing project managers' perspectives on project management, we have experienced that some people misunderstand our objective. We therefore want to clarify what we are not going to discuss. We know by reading about different project management schools that researchers are focusing on different aspects of project management. Söderlund (2002, 2011) introduced the notion of seven different schools of project management. It was later extended to nine schools by Anbari, Bredillet, and Turner, see Bredillet (2007) and subsequent issues. The different schools illustrate that researchers are addressing different aspects of project management and proposing adequate approaches and methods to deal with the accompanying problems. This paper is not about how researchers see the challenges of project work. It is not about the different schools of project management.

We know that different types of projects should be approached differently. Shenhar and Dvir (2007) have empirically shown that projects are managed, planned, organized, and controlled in different ways. Or as Shenhar eloquently phrases it: "One size does not fit all projects" (Shenhar, 2001). Finnish researchers (Artto et al., 2008) have theoretically shown that the autonomy of the project (how independent the project is of the base organization and stakeholders) affects its strategy, and consequently the way it approaches its work. This paper will not discuss if different types of projects should be approached in different ways.

Our intention is to find out if project managers have different perspectives on project management and see their challenges differently. And if our study shows that this is the case, we have to discuss what a specific project should do to clarify the perspective of the actual project manager.

2. Perspectives

We will argue that professionals within the field may see project management from different angles—or perspectives, in our terminology. By "perspective", we mean a certain approach to, or perception of, reality. That means we acknowledge that there is more than one way to see the world. We accept that

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reality depends on “who you ask”, or, as others put it, reality is a social construction (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Hacking, 1999). Reality, or knowledge of reality, is structured (or constructed) by the spectator. Each spectator is affected by his or her (social) context. We speak of “social” here in the wider sense, including childhood, training, and experience. A spectator’s perspective is not necessarily a clearly defined and static entity. It is generally flexible and sensitive to circumstances.

No one perspective is best. We all see reality in our own way. It depends on our particular background—that is, our knowledge and experience. Our background affects what we see and what something means to us. One person may see things, which remain invisible to somebody else because their perceptions are guided by different knowledge and experience. What we focus on is governed by experience and what, given that starting point, we find important. If we acknowledge that project managers might regard their duties differently depending on their background and earlier experiences, we should investigate if different perspectives prevail and what the consequences are.

It has also been shown that perspectives change over time. They are affected by published works, but especially by best practices (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Project management is a rather new discipline, and it would be surprising if project managers look at their task the same way as they did years ago. This is one more reason to investigate the perspectives of project managers on project management.

3. Research on different perspectives

We know from other disciplines that professionals may look at their assignments differently. In their well-known paper, Klein and Meckling (1958) presented two different perspectives on how to conduct product development. They distinguished between Mr. Optimizer and Mr. Skeptic. Mr. Optimizer analyzes and compares all alternatives and decides which one to go for at the outset and implements it immediately. Mr. Skeptic recognizes that the path to the goal is uncertain. Rather than relying on up-front plans and formal processes, he relies on intuitive judgment and trial-and-error experiences. The original goal for the product might even be changed when new information becomes available. These perspectives are also in general of relevance for project management.

As early as 1983, in the second issue of the *International Journal of Project Management*, a Danish researcher argued for alternatives to conventional project management thinking. He said: “In the same way that we do not all accept the same lifestyle, we cannot all be suited to the same form of project management” (Lichtenberg, 1983, p.101). He believed that alternatives to traditional and rational thinking were needed. His article is still relevant.

The idea of different perspectives on project management was also presented in the early 1990s by Packendorff (1995). He writes about the common assumption (the project as a tool for achieving higher-level ends) and the alternative assumption (the project as a temporary organization—an aggregate of individuals

temporarily enacting a common cause). Two perspectives were also presented by Jugdev et al. (2001). They distinguish between the Old Economy (old truths about project management) and the New Economy (new insights about project management).

The UK-based research network Rethinking Project Management proposed a new perspective on project management, which suggests that project work has to take into account project complexity, social processes, value creation, adopt a broader conceptualization, and encourage practitioner development (Winter et al., 2006a, 2006b). As part of this research, four different perspectives on business projects were presented: projects as value creation, organizational change, intervention, and service delivery (Winter et al., 2006a, 2006b). As a follow-up of this research, Winter and Szczepanek (2009) presented seven pragmatic images for making sense of the complex realities of projects. They see projects as social, political, intervention, value creation, development, temporary, and change processes.

We also have to point to “Making Projects Critical”, which is the title of a series of international workshops intended to provide a forum for research from a wide range of critical perspectives relating to all aspects of projects. The intention of the workshops has been to highlight the theoretical and methodological limitations of traditional conceptions of projects and project management. In particular, they have drawn upon wider intellectual resources than the instrumental rationality, quantitative and positivist methodologies, which have been used traditionally to understand, implement, and control organizational projects, see for instance Cicmil and Hodgson (2006); Hodgson and Cicmil (2006).

In a recent paper Svejvig and Andersen (2015) present several different perspectives on project management. They base their literature search on six different categories: contextualization (expanding the project concept to encompass elements such as environment and organizational strategy), social and political aspects, rethinking practice (alternative methods), complexity and uncertainty, the actuality of projects (how projects are actually carried out), and broader conceptualization.

The earlier work on perspectives within other disciplines (exemplified by product development) and within project management might be seen as a justification for further studies of the perspectives of project managers.

4. Two perspectives

The literature on perspectives on project management has not focused specifically on how project managers see their task. We make this as our research question: Do project managers have different perspectives on project management?

Project managers are not a uniform group. However, we choose as our initial approach not to distinguish between different categories of project managers.

Even if we agree that project managers may have different perspectives on project management, this is not so easy to decide, since perspective is a rather broad concept.

Since this is, as we said, an initial study, we choose a rather simple approach. Our studies of the above previous research on perspectives showed that one aspect was seen to be vital in

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