Mapping the Future for Project Management as a Discipline - for more focused Research Efforts

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Abstract

Despite the large number of successfully delivered projects and programmes, the failure rate remains unacceptably high. Project related practice has been the subject of research for well over 30 years and there is a significant educational programme to support practitioners, increased focus on standards and alignment with organisational strategy and increased awareness of behavioural aspects, but still projects fail, often spectacularly. A paradigm shift is needed and alternative approaches are necessary to achieve that shift. As Kuhn shows, such change is often driven by new forms of thinking and by those not steeped in the traditions of a professional discipline.

Projects are seen as sociological in nature and sensitive in context: concerned with people, their effective performance and team behaviour. We argue that these factors require new ways of looking for solutions to problems and that this will lead to developing new approaches to PPP management in the future. In assessing ideas that might be needed in the future, some researchers have examined the past history of projects but we propose to move the profession forward by drawing upon IPMA's unique strengths and worldwide resources, views, cultural differences and patterns of thinking to drive new approaches. We conclude that a Project Management Think Tank is needed to achieve the necessary paradigm shift. It will need to draw on enabling technologies as well as range of talented thinkers who are able to bring new ideas to the table and synthesise these ideas into pragmatic concepts for practitioners to test.

Keywords: Project management research; Future; Think tank

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1. Introduction

Project Management (PM) in its various forms has established a considerable reputation for being critical to business performance and organisational success and enabling business growth (PWC, 2012). PM has been successfully applied in a wide range of fields as diverse as engineering, medicine and social sciences to information technology and education. PM is now highly visible to the man in the street, who reads not of the many successes that bring benefit to so many but of failure. Almost daily, the world press holds up for examination projects that have been delivered late, have failed technically or whose cost is many times the original expectation. Even spectacularly successful programmes such as the London Olympic Games have attracted criticism . Thus it comes as no surprise that genuine project failure is widely reported as a glance at almost any daily paper or the broadcast media reports will show. Despite disproportionate reporting of failed projects, there can be little doubt that far too many projects do indeed fail. Reports by the Standish Group consistently show success rates to be around 30%. In the IT sector alone, the failure rate is claimed to be around 60 to 70% with a cost in Millions annually (Standish Group 2011).

The rate of failure across all industries should be a concern for both practicing Project Managers and academics. It should also be a major concern for the membership societies that claim to represent project management and its practitioners since they are the self-appointed guardians of the so called profession. Individual practitioners should be concerned because ultimately their reputation and livelihood depend on a high rate of success for projects. Academics, or at least those who research the domain and attempt to pass on what they have established, depend to some extent on being able to show that what they have learned is helpful to practitioners as well as academically credible. The interests of the membership societies can only be served if projects are seen to be largely successful. By no means least, clients have some interest in seeing that they get value for the money they invest in projects.

There is an overwhelming need to ensure that projects succeed. The approach to addressing this problem has been varied. There has been a vast expansion in accreditation activities by the membership societies so that there are many certificated Project Managers; yet there is little formal evidence that such PMs are any more successful that their un-certificated colleagues. Research into all aspects of project management has been assiduously conducted over the past 50 years and is well documented in the learned journals such as the International Journal of Project Management, the Project Management Journal and several newer publications in the last few years. PM education at undergraduate, post graduate and doctoral levels is at an all time high yet the failure rate of projects remains stubbornly high.

2. Potential Solutions

One aspect that might be addressed in order to improve the situation is that of research in PM related topics. PM research has covered many areas and according Shenhar and Dvir (2007) has steadily evolved from the firmly engineering based to the more social science oriented approaches reported at key conferences such as IRNOP, EURAM and PMI Research. The wider research trend is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Theoretical and research implications as seen by Shenhar and Dvir (2008).