



Development paths of project managers: What and how do project managers learn from their experiences?

Chantal M.J.H. Savelsbergh ^{a,*}, Liselore A. Havermans ^{b,1}, Peter Storm ^{c,2}

^a *Open University of the Netherlands, P.O. Box 2960, 6401 DL Heerlen, the Netherlands*

^b *VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands, de Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

^c *Kennis & Co, the Netherlands, Eickhovenstraat 8, 6367 BZ Voerendaal, the Netherlands*

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Abstract

The development paths of project managers are paved with formal and informal learning experiences. Knowledge of the learning experiences that project managers indicate as important for their development as professionals is limited in both the academic and the practitioner world. In the current study we explore what and how project managers learn from experiences, and what is perceived as supporting this learning. We used a multi-method approach, consisting of in-depth interviews and a short follow-up survey among 31 project managers. Results show that most learning experiences occur more or less accidentally on the job and support for learning from these experiences is limited. This suggests potential to improve the quality and pace of the development paths of project managers. Limitations of the current study, and implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed opening up avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

Much professional learning occurs on the job (Day et al., 2014; Eraut, 2004). This informal learning on the job is of major importance in the development of professionals in complex jobs who have to deal with new and unexpected challenges in the environment (Day et al., 2014). For several reasons, this might especially be true for project managers, who mostly seem to ‘learn by doing’ from their experiences, rather than learn by studying. Firstly, many project managers fulfill their project responsibilities alongside another job; a more

permanent position for which they have been educated. Secondly, even if being a project manager is their primary job, most project managers did not set out to work towards this role when they first entered the job market, but ‘rolled into it’ at a later stage in their career. This is in line with Palm and Lindahl (2015) in their findings among project managers in technical environments. They show that technical experts were often promoted to the project manager position, despite lacking formal management training, so they had to learn ‘on the job’. According to Palm and Lindahl (2015), project managers perceive a lack of formal structures for training, guidance and support. The consequence is that their formal education in project management is often limited. Thirdly, the application of the recognized bodies of knowledge (e.g., the PMBOK by PMI, 2013) is not standardized, as principals of project managers generally use their own personal norms and standards about what constitutes good practice in project management. This means that project managers frequently have to adapt their way

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 0 6 46 23 60 60, +31 0 45 576 28 26.

E-mail addresses: chantal.savelsbergh@ou.nl (C.M.J.H. Savelsbergh), l.a.havermans@vu.nl (L.A. Havermans), peter@kennisenco.nl (P. Storm).

¹ Tel.: +31 0 20 59 82,293.

² Tel.: +31 0 6 55,163,079.

of working according to the expectations of a new principal in a particular project, learning as they go along. In summary, informal learning through experiences seems to pave the development paths of project managers, i.e., the path through which a project manager develops as a professional over time.

Yet, knowledge of project managers' developmental paths' in practice is still limited, leaving many questions largely unanswered concerning what and how they learn. Increased insights into project managers' development paths might not only spearhead their own motivation and career progression, but also the success of their projects and organizations. Although it is known that in practice, both formal and informal learning are inextricably intertwined (Marsick, 2009), most literature on the development of project managers mainly focuses on formal programs (Berggren & Söderlund, 2008; Crawford et al., 2006; Ojiako et al., 2011; Pant & Baroudi, 2008; Thomas & Mengel, 2008). Therefore, research that takes into account development through both formal programs and ongoing practice is called for (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Day et al., 2014). In addition, the extensive body of knowledge on the competences of effective project managers (see, e.g., Müller & Turner, 2007) gives little insight into the development paths through which they become such effective project managers. This raises the question of how the development of project managers progresses.

The first aim of this paper is to build a picture of the development paths of project managers, focusing on both their formal and informal learning experiences and to investigate the questions 'what do project managers learn from their experiences and how do they learn it?'

A second aim of our investigation is to gain more insights into the development of project managers through focusing on the practitioner's lived experiences of projects, as Cicmil et al. (2006, p. 675) call for. In so doing, we follow Morris's (2013) plea to increase the validity of the insights gained by illustrating them through the use of interpretative epistemologies, focusing on the experiences they are built on, in addition to the positivistic epistemologies that seem to dominate public knowledge, giving recipes and lessons learned. The Project Management Institute's (PMI) Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK by PMI, 2013) is an example of such positivist epistemology that Morris refers to. This standard is based on the practical experiences of those who created it. However we don't know which experiences these are and why these experiences led the PMI authors to conclude that their lessons learned are truly best practices. Using an approach in which insights gained will be illustrated by the experiences they are built on can enable an increase in useful knowledge. We expect that these results will not only serve the interests of academia but even more those of project managers and the practitioners who contribute to the professional development of project managers, in particular human resource (HR) managers. As learning experiences and their developmental outcomes are likely to be context dependent, practitioners can draw on the descriptions of the actual developmental experiences of others and translate these to their own situation and the broader environment. This can stimulate learning and development through reflection.

In summary, we explore the formal and informal development of project managers by capturing the types of learning experiences that project managers perceive as having stimulated their own development. Before moving on to the details of the current study, we introduce the theoretical background from which we explore the development paths of project managers.

2. Theory

Learning is the process through which development occurs (Kolb, 1984). Experience plays a central role in this process of learning (Kolb, 1984). In order to uncover the development paths of project managers, we explore how and what project managers learn from their experiences. With respect to *how* project managers learn, the literature on learning and professional development distinguishes multiple avenues for learning and types of development. We will first discuss formal and informal learning and how the project context can be especially conducive to informal learning on the job. Secondly, we will discuss three different types of development (planned development, self-guided development, and innate development) and their likely relevance for the development of project managers. Moving on to *what* project managers learn, we discuss prescriptions of what project managers need to learn according to the literature, before we qualitatively explore what project managers actually learn in practice. Finally, again related to *how* project managers learn, we discuss how the development of project managers can be supported by others and through self-reflection.

2.1. Avenues of learning and types of development

2.1.1. Formal and informal learning

Different avenues for learning and development need to be taken into account in order to understand how project managers learn and develop. A clear distinction is made between learning on the job versus learning in the classroom, better known as informal versus formal learning.

Formal learning takes place within, or follows from, a formally organized learning program or event (Eraut, 2000). Examples of formal learning in project management are training and education related to project management certification, and undergraduate and postgraduate education with a significant project management component (Crawford et al., 2006). These programs often fall short in matching the complexity of project actuality (Crawford et al., 2006; Thomas & Mengel, 2008).

Informal learning involves learning both from others and from personal experience, and can take many different forms (Eraut, 2004). Examples of informal learning are mentoring, learning from complex problems, working above your grade, being forced to change perspectives, and being stimulated to reflect (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001). A significant part of professional development takes place outside formal educational and training contexts (Day et al., 2014; Eraut, 2004). In this sense practitioners can be seen as reflective inquirers, addressing the problems they encounter in their work through intertwined thought and action to develop new images and

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