



Rethinking project management: A structured literature review with a critical look at the brave new world

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a structured review of the rethinking project management (RPM) literature based on the classification and analysis of 74 contributions and in addition takes a critical look at this brave new world. Through the analysis, a total of 6 overarching categories emerged: contextualization, social and political aspects, rethinking practice, complexity and uncertainty, actuality of projects and broader conceptualization. These categories cover a broad range of different contributions with diverse and alternative perspectives on project management. The early RPM literature dates back to the 1980s, while the majority was published in 2006 onwards, and the research stream appears to be still active. A critical look at this brave new world exhibits the overall challenge for RPM to become much more diffused and accepted.
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Keywords: Rethinking project management; Literature review; Project management research; Classical project management

1. Introduction

The management of projects is of considerable economic importance and dramatic growth has occurred in project work across different sectors, industries and countries (Turner et al., 2010; Winter et al., 2006c). Projects have become an important way to structure work in most organizations (Bakker, 2010) and constitute one of the most important organizational developments (Winter et al., 2006c). Despite the substantial increase in the importance and propagation of projects, the conceptual base of models and methodologies for project management has remained fairly static in the past (Koskela and Howell, 2002) and has long been dominated by a technocratic and rationalistic viewpoint (Morris et al., 2011b; Packendorff, 1995) – hereafter denoted classical project management – which has received

substantial criticism for its shortcomings in practice (Koskela and Howell, 2002; Sahlin-Andersson and Söderholm, 2002).

Accordingly, several scholars have started to think more widely about projects and project management as a reaction to the classical view, but also as a response to the challenges of carrying out projects in practice and the poor track record of previous projects (Morris et al., 2011b). This wider thinking has developed many new insights over the years, such as moving from the “project as a tool” approach to the idea of the “project as a temporary organization” (Packendorff, 1995) and understanding project management as a holistic discipline for achieving organizational efficiency, effectiveness and innovation (Jugdev et al., 2001). This more holistic and pluralistic understanding of project management holds a great deal of potential for enhancing and expanding the current knowledge and practice within the field and has been labeled “rethinking project management” (RPM) (Winter et al., 2006c). RPM has evolved over many years, despite the hegemony of the dominant view and often in contrast to this view. The early

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literature dates back to the mid-1980s (Lichtenberg, 1983), and the recent RPM literature indicates that the research stream is still highly active (Saynisch, 2010a).

It is time to take stock of what we know about RPM and look critically at the brave new world – and there are several reasons for such a structured literature review. First, RPM is a diverse research area and a literature review can offer useful input to the conceptualization of the RPM concept by establishing a more integrated view and setting boundaries. Second, an understanding of the development of RPM over time makes it possible to elucidate RPM with all its sub-versions from a broader historical perspective, enabling us to see how the components of the current stock were added and basically how we arrived at the current situation. Finally, we analyze the past in order to prepare for the future (Webster and Watson, 2002) with the aim of keeping this research area viable and stimulating theoretical as well as professional development. We formulate our research questions from the above: (1) *How can we conceptualize RPM and how has it developed over time?* (2) *How can future research expand the RPM research area?*

We conducted a literature review consisting of two parts in order to address the research questions: the first part was an explorative and less structured literature search for alternatives

to classical project management; this was followed by the second part, which was a rigid structured literature review consisting of four phases, starting with the definition of the review scope, the conceptualization of RPM, literature searches with key words and finally the literature analysis. In particular, the scoping and selection represented a challenging process in order to establish a more integrated view and set appropriate boundaries for RPM, in which we included as examples the UK RPM initiative (Winter et al., 2006c), the Scandinavian school of project studies (Sahlin-Andersson and Söderholm, 2002) and practice studies (Blomquist et al., 2010), but excluded for instance the making projects critical research stream (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006).

This review consists of 74 contributions, which we classified and analyzed. We set out to provide an overview of the existing RPM body of knowledge by focusing on the basic principles behind the RPM literature and how it is differentiated from the classical view. Through the analysis, a total of 6 overarching categories emerged: contextualization, social and political aspects, rethinking practice, complexity and uncertainty, actuality of projects and broader conceptualization. These categories cover a broad range of different contributions with diverse and alternative perspectives on project management. A critical discussion about

Table 1
Comparing classical project management with rethinking project management.

Author	Classical Project Management	Rethinking Project Management
Packendorff (1995, p. 328)	Project metaphor: the project as a tool Process: linear, with the phases plan, control and evaluate	Project metaphor: the project as a temporary organization Process: iterative, with the phases expectation setting, actions and learning
Jugdev et al. (2001, p. 36)	Project management: as a set of tools and techniques used to achieve project efficiencies Success: measured by efficiency performance metrics Practice project management: focus on the project details at the operational level and tactically	Project management: as a holistic discipline used to achieve project/program/organizational efficiency, effectiveness and innovation Success: a multidimensional construct measured by efficiency, effectiveness and innovation Sell project management: be an advocate and champion of project management by aligning its value with the firm's strategic business priorities
Winter et al. (2006c, p. 642, original emphasis)	Simple life-cycle-based models of projects, as the dominant model of project and project management with the (often unexamined) assumption that the life-cycle model <i>is</i> (assumed to be) the actual terrain	New models and theories that recognize and illuminate the <i>complexity</i> of projects and project management, at all levels. The new models and theories are explicitly presented as only <i>partial</i> theories of the complex terrain
Shenhar and Dvir (2007, p. 11, original emphasis)	Approach: traditional project management Project goal: completing the job on time, on budget and within the requirements Management style: one size fits all	Approach: adaptive project management Project goal: achieving multiple business results and meeting multiple criteria Management style: adaptive approach, one size does <i>not</i> fit all
Andersen (2008, p. 5, 10, 49)	Perspective: task perspective Project definition: a project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result (Project Management Institute, 2004, p. 5) Main focus: execute the defined task	Perspective: organizational perspective Project definition: a project is a temporary organization established by its base organization to carry out an assignment on its behalf Main focus: value creation. Create a desirable development in another organization
Lenfle and Loch (2010, p. 45)	Project type and target: routine execution, target given and defined from above Examples of domain of relevance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Known markets and customer reactions • Known performance drivers of developed systems • Known environmental parameters 	Project type and target: novel strategic project with a general vision and direction, but detailed goals not known and partially emergent Examples of domain of relevance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New markets and unknown customer reactions • Unknown technology • Complexity with unforeseeable interactions among drivers and variables

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