

The case for good reviewing [☆]

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1. Introduction

After some years of remarkable growth, the scholarly field of Project Management (PM) research currently finds itself in a crucial stage of development. In this editorial, we make an analysis of submissions to PM's premier specialty journal, the *International Journal of Project Management* over the period 2007–2010, and argue that one of the most important ways in which PM research can further evolve is to pay more attention to the mundane, yet important, act of good reviewing — an activity that we believe has received relatively little attention in the PM community thus far.

Let us begin by considering the crucial juncture that, as a scholarly discipline, PM is currently at. On the one hand, the PM research field is characterized by signs of major progress. For one, there has been a strong growth in terms of published output: recent years have seen the publication of three major edited volumes with a central focus on PM, published by top-tier publishers (Cattani et al., 2011; Kenis et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2011); the PM/temporary organizations literature published in ISI ranked peer-reviewed articles is growing exponentially (Bakker, 2010); and besides some of the long-standing PM specialty journals, the field has recently seen the rise of a number of new journals, including the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, the *International Journal of Project Organisation and Management*, and the *Journal of Project, Program, and Portfolio Management*.

This increase in research productivity is reflected in a more distinctive presence at international research conferences. We

have, for instance, witnessed the remarkable success of PM at the EURAM Conference — being one of the major tracks since the launch of this annual conference more than ten years ago; the launch and popularity of the PMI (Project Management Institute) Research and Education conference with approximately 500 academics and practitioners from the US and internationally; the successful conferences organized by the International Research Network on Organizing by Projects (IRNOP); and the successful Professional Development Workshops on PM and project-based organization at the Academy of Management annual meetings in 2008, 2009, and 2010. Also, there is the remarkable growth of members in PM associations, which is definitely a clear indication that more and more practitioners would like to pursue their career as project managers. For instance, PMI which was founded in the late 1960s had almost 400,000 members in 2011, growing annually with a rate of 20% during the last decade. Several of the practitioner associations also take active part in research activities, for instance, by publishing books and research reports, by offering scholarly grants, by publishing journals aimed for transferring research findings from research to practice, and by helping doctoral students with guidance and funding. Indeed, this provides a solid platform for research-practice collaboration and the dissemination of research findings and practice experience that is rather unique compared to many other sub-disciplines of management (Söderlund and Maylor, 2012).

Next to these accomplishments, however, the PM research field also faces a number of challenges. Most notably, not everybody in the scholarly community is convinced of the academic rigor and theoretical depth of PM scholarship. As an indication, while there has been noted an increasing presence of PM-related research in the major, top-tier general management journals, still, the far majority of PM publications tends to wind up in specialty journals with lower rankings (cf. Kwak and Anbari, 2009). Efforts have been underway for some time to both get more PM research into

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the major management journals, as well as to further improve the quality and status of the specialty PM journals themselves.

Thus far, the emphasis in such efforts seems to have been on the active production of better research — a strategy that is as important as it is valuable. The other side of this coin, however, *good reviewing*, seems to have received far less attention in the PM community. From our standpoint, this is a considerable problem that deserves special attention and debate. While we acknowledge that on an individual level, our resumes tend to be judged more by the number and impact of our publications rather than the number of excellent reviews, we believe this lopsided interest is unjust. On a broad level, of course, rigorous reviewing ensures that only, or predominantly, high-quality studies make it all the way to publication.

Moreover, peer reviews are an important part of the vibrancy within a scientific domain, perhaps even especially so in social science where reviews tend to have a “developmental function” (Schminke, 2002: 487). Also on the individual level, there are strong incentives to engage in good reviewing. For instance, as pointed out by Treviño (2008), reviewing for journals is an important activity to learn about others’ work and to early find out about new ideas, methods, and theories that the reviewer might have overlooked in his or her own work. Indeed, reviewing also ensures that scholars are receiving the necessary input and are being confronted with other beliefs and opinions that help to improve research quality. In fact, reviewer comments can constitute the few occasions where researchers are getting the honest, insightful and constructive feedback necessary to improve their ideas and theories, and enhance the clarity of their thinking. As such, scholars can grow by receiving and producing constructive reviews of our scholarship. Therefore, we believe that good reviewing is beneficial for the PM community as a whole, but also, and importantly, to every individual that makes up that community.

We are certainly not the first to touch upon the topic of peer-reviewing in the social sciences (e.g. Bedeian, 2004; Lepak, 2009; Roediger, 1987; Runeson, and Loosemore, 1999; Treviño, 2008; Tsui, and Hollenbeck, 2009; Zuckerman and Merton, 1971). Why then, is a discussion of peer-reviewing warranted for the field of PM? Fore mostly, there seems to be a need for it. We organized a roundtable discussion that involved multiple editors of PM journals, where they indicated that especially the rigor and turnaround time of peer-reviewing at their journals was causing them major problems. At least two of the participants expressed a degree of envy toward the major management journals that in their perception had quicker and more rigorous review processes in place. So while a literature is out there that provides guidance on how to do good reviews, this literature seems not to have caught on (yet) in PM. Partly, we believe, this may have to do with the field itself. For sure, PM is different in the sense that it is in a less mature, pre-paradigmatic state of development, rapidly growing and changing, and in recent years becoming increasingly diverse (Söderlund, 2011). For these reasons, we would argue that the time is ripe to take stock of peer-reviewing in PM, and draw the attention of the PM audience to some of the broader discussions that surround peer-reviewing, especially for academic journals. Before proceeding, however, we should

acknowledge that we do not ourselves pertain to have all the answers, nor do we aim to come up with an all-encompassing analysis. Our aim is more modest: to spur a debate about the nature of good reviewing within the domain of PM, and to offer a few empirically-based illustrations that could take the field forward in this regard.

The remainder of this editorial is structured as follows. First, we review the current debate about the nature and quality of reviewing in management studies and seek to apply some of the insights to the field of PM. Second, we study the submissions and review processes to PM’s premier specialty journal, the *International Journal of Project Management*, over the period 2007–2010 and suggest a list of indicators for analyzing the quality of submissions and reviews. Third, we offer a number of conclusions and ideas on how to move the debate forward.

2. Reviewing scholarly research on reviewing scholarly research

The broader literature on peer-reviewing in scholarly research suggests that the practice of peer-reviewing has been institutionalized over a period of more or less 300 years, to ensure the quality of scientific findings and to strengthen the rigor of scientific methods (Zuckerman and Merton, 1971). Lee (2002: 9) pointed out that “the peer review process is at the very heart of scholarly research” and that the review process is the most critical activity to assure high quality in published texts within academic communities. Others have stated that “peer-reviewed publications remain the gold standard for judging the credibility of scientific claims” (Bedeian, 2004: 198), and that proper peer-reviews are essential for making journals trustworthy (Benos et al., 2003). However, the nature and quality of reviewing are viewed to vary widely; some scholars have even questioned the extent to which the peer-review process as a whole is productive and helpful (Siegelman and Whicker, 1987). This led Roediger (1987: 239) to note, paraphrasing Winston Churchill’s well-known quote about democracy, that peer-reviewing “is the worst form of scientific evaluation, except for all others that have been tried”.

Having the process of peer-reviewing in place has the aim to ensure five important features of manuscripts (Benos et al., 2003). First, quality, checking that no mistakes in procedure or logic have been made; second, that the results presented support the conclusions drawn; third, that no errors in citations to previous work have been made; fourth, that research methods follow proper standards accepted by the research community; and five, that the work is original and significant. Following Tsui and Hollenbeck (2009) and Lepak (2009), a good reviewer is one who provides rigorous, timely and constructive suggestions on how to improve a manuscript with regard to (at least) the five above mentioned features of submitted manuscripts. Most importantly, a good reviewer identifies both strengths and weaknesses, and identifies ways to capitalize on the strengths and remedy the weaknesses.

In the following, we will more elaborately pick up on three specific issues that seem particularly important with regards to peer-reviewing in PM, which are: rigor, turnaround time, and inter-reviewer agreement.

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