

# Analyzing project management research: Perspectives from top management journals

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## Abstract

This paper examines project management research from the perspective of its relationship to allied disciplines in the management field and provides a view of the progress of project management as a research-based academic discipline. This study which is partially funded by the Project Management Institute specifically investigates project management research in allied disciplines from 18 top management and business journal publications and categorizes it into eight allied disciplines. The evolution and trends of project management research are analyzed by exploring, identifying, and classifying management journal articles on project management in the allied disciplines. The analysis of project management research in the allied disciplines reveals an explosion of popularity and strong interest in project management research. The ranking of occurrences of the eight allied disciplines from most to the least appeared subjects over the last 50 years are (1) Strategy/Portfolio Management; (2) Operations Research/Decision Sciences; (3) Organizational Behavior/Human Resources Management; (4) Information Technology/Information Systems; (5) Technology Applications/Innovation; (6) Performance Management/Earned Value Management; (7) Engineering and Construction; and (8) Quality Management/Six Sigma. Result of this study help us better understand the evolution of project management as a field of practice and an academic discipline, and allow us to provide suggestions for future project management research opportunities.

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## 1. Introduction

There has been a long debate in the management education community as to whether “project management” is a practice or an academic discipline. In the R&D field, tools and techniques of project management are applied and implemented to complete complex projects successfully. In the construction engineering and management discipline, people learn and implement planning, managing, and controlling of engineering construction projects to meet the time, budget, and specifications. In the engineering field, production planning, scheduling and quantitative

methods are applied to manufacturing systems to achieve higher productivity. However, when it comes to the business and management field, scholars often appear puzzled and unconvinced of the notion “project management”. The origin, history, and evolution of project management, and its academic background, foundations, and underlying theory, have been debated and studied only to a limited extent from the management field’s academic perspective, and supporting literature is limited. As a result, previous research had limitations to transfer the message outside of the project management field to the broader business and management academic audience.

There have been important efforts among international PM researchers and practitioners to identify and rethink PM [1], and the findings were disseminated widely within the PM community. Several other studies aimed at understanding trends in PM research and publication. Betts and

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Lansley [2] investigated papers published in *International Journal of Project Management* for its first 10 years and found that papers mainly reviewed practical experience and literature, contributed to interesting insights and new tools and techniques. Themistocleous and Wearne [3] reported that cases from the construction industry remained predominant followed by the service sector in PM research, and that in terms of theory building and theoretical basis of PM, there was still a large room for improvement. Their paper concluded that the future development of PM as a discipline should be done by building and testing different research models so that a theory of PM may emerge. Crawford et al. [4] analyzed the trends of emphasis within PM literature by investigating two flagship PM journals, *Project Management Journal* and *International Journal of Project Management*. The paper found a reduction in focus on interpersonal issues and quality management and increased research in project evaluation, improvement, and strategic alignment. Abudayyeh et al. [5] examined engineering and construction research trends by reviewing articles published in *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management* for 18 years and suggested increasing research collaboration between industry and academia.

Kloppenbergh and Opfer [6] identified project management research published in articles, papers, dissertations, and government research reports since 1960. They found that emphasis moved from development and use of automated project management software and tools to risk management and earned value management and then to human resource aspects. They also determined that research focus moved from large government defense projects to commercial applications in construction, information systems, and new product development. They concluded that project management has extensive current opportunities and a bright future. Bredillet [7] investigated management journal production on project management as reflected in EBSCO Business Source Premier Database and used co-word analysis to understand the main trends in the field. He found that these trends focus on strategic management issues, creation of value for stakeholders, technical issues, and softer issues. He concluded that project management is becoming more focused on the implementation of organizational strategy.

More recently, Anbari et al. [8] conducted an extensive review of academic research literature on project management and organized the literature into nine major schools of thought on the basis of the key premise that drives each one. These are: optimization, modeling, governance, behavior, success, decision, process, marketing, and contingency schools of thought. They pointed out the overlap in research in project management schools of thought and their inevitable interactions.

This study investigates project management (PM) research from the perspective of its relationship to allied disciplines in the management field. By exploring, identifying, and classifying top management journal articles related

to PM research in the allied disciplines, the origin, evolution, and trends of PM research in the management field are revealed. This study specifically investigates PM research in allied disciplines from the management academy's perspective by not observing PM research trends from the viewpoint of the PM community. The goal of this research is to better understand PM from the perspective of the academic management world and the trends of allied disciplines, and to enhance our understanding of PM as a research-based academic discipline. This will help researchers interested in PM focus their efforts on areas of high impact and relevance to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field. In turn, this will help improve learning, education, and training programs, and ultimately lead to better performance on projects and in organizations.

## 2. Research approach

### 2.1. Project management research in the management field

To thoroughly investigate PM research in allied disciplines, this study reviewed major journal publications from the management and business fields. Respected journals in the management community including the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS) [9], Academy of Management (AOM) [10], Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), and others were analyzed in detail. Since the management and business fields are very broad, we identified and defined eight different categories of PM allied disciplines for the purpose of this research. Then, we carefully selected 18 top business and management academic journals that published articles related to PM to review and categorize journal articles into these eight different disciplines.

By chronologically analyzing and categorizing more than 500 journal articles from the selected 18 top journals in the management and business fields published from the 1950s to the summer of 2007, this study analyzed publications trends of different domains (OR vs. OB vs. Practice) in different journals. Result of this study help us better understand the evolution of PM as a field of practice and an academic discipline, and allow us to provide suggestions for future PM research opportunities.

### 2.2. Top management journals

There have been numerous studies to identify, assess, and rank top management journals in the business and management field [83–90]. However, the lists of top management journals varied depending on the specific field and there was no clear consensus among academics on top management journals in the business and management field. Business schools appear to be obsessed with their annual rankings measured by different entities such as Business Week, Wall Street Journal, US News and World Report, and Financial Times. For the Financial Times, one of the criteria to rank the business school is to look

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