

## Guest editorial

## Projects in innovation, innovation in projects selected papers from the IRNOP VIII conference

### 1. Moving IRNOP

This special issue contains a selection of papers from the eighth IRNOP research conference which took place in Brighton in September 2007. IRNOP – the International Research Network on Organizing by Projects – was founded in 1993 as a loosely coupled network of researchers interested in projects and their management. The first conference took place in 1994 in Sweden with the theme ‘Temporary organizations and project management’. Since then the conference has taken place every two years in Paris, Calgary (Canada), Sydney, Rotterdam, Turku (Finland), and Xi’an (China). Researchers from academic institutions around the world plus representatives from the project practitioner community attend the conferences. In 2006 it was decided to change from even to odd years to avoid clashes with some other important project related research conferences.

The Freeman Centre, which hosted IRNOP VIII, is home to two internationally renowned research institutes which specialize in innovation, Sussex University’s SPRU (Science and Technology Policy Research) and Brighton University’s Centre for Research on Innovation Management (CENTRIM). In line with this, the theme of the conference was ‘Projects in Innovation, Innovation in Projects’ and the call for papers specified the need for authors to link projects and their management with innovation. More than 80 abstracts were received. After a double blind review process more than fifty full papers, ranging from those dealing with innovation in project management to those related to the role of projects in innovation, were accepted and were presented over the three days of the conference. We have selected thirteen of these for this special issue.

The conference ended with Friday’s innovative plenary session. Instead of a presentation, a debate on the motion: “This house believes we no longer need the discipline of project management” took place. Professor Mike Hobday (SPRU/CENTRIM) and Professor Anders Söderholm from Umeå University, spoke for the motion. Dr. Harvey Maylor of Cranfield and Professor Rodney Turner, University of Limerick, spoke against. Following a lively and entertaining debate, the final vote went in favor of the motion. As Professor Hobday put it later: “Given the high proportion

of people in the audience with a vested interest in project management, this appears to be a clear case of turkeys voting for Christmas”. Although intended as a light-hearted way to finish up the conference the debate raised some important issues about project management itself and about research on projects and project management. In a research note at the end of this Special Issue, Joanna Geraldi has tried to capture the salient points in this debate and challenges us as project researchers to continue the discussion through our own research and in future papers.

### 2. The legacy of IRNOP: rethinking, reflecting

As organizers of the IRNOP Conference this year, we wanted to stick to two of the IRNOP’s basic ideas – to challenge existing thinking, and to open up for a greater plurality in project management research. The organization of the debate at the end of the conference is very much a way of keeping the debate and critical voices alive. The plurality issue was embraced by inviting papers that tried to link innovation with projects, and projects with innovation. We wanted to see what came out if these two knowledge fields and phenomena were combined – in what way would that contribute to our understanding of project management, and, hopefully, in what way would that spur ideas and insights on how to research innovation?

The link between projects and innovation has triggered much research in recent years. Several of these studies have indicated the usefulness of this combination. For instance, Shenhar and Dvir [1] draw on research on breakthrough projects and new product development to outline a contingency theory of project management focusing on novelty, technological uncertainty, complexity and pace. Davies and Hobday [2] summarize a multi-year study of the business of projects. The authors seek to outline what it takes to develop project capabilities and how the innovative capability of the firm is tied to its ways of generating and organizing projects. A decade earlier, Midler [3] shed light on the process of projectification at Renault to capture the transformation of the project operations of the firm and how that transformation improves the innovation capacity of the firm. These earlier contributions in several ways not

only show that there is a fruitful link between innovations and projects, but also illustrate the importance of doing research within this area.

The often mentioned EPSRC-funded research network on Rethinking Project Management gives us additional arguments and insights. This network highlighted five important directions for future research, and we believe that the papers selected for this special issue in several ways contribute and further highlights the need for research on these directions (see [4, p. 642]):

1. From research on the lifecycle model of projects and project management to theories of complexity of project management.
2. From projects as instrumental processes to projects as social processes.
3. From product creation as the prime focus to value creation as the prime focus.
4. From narrow conceptualization to broader conceptualization of projects.
5. From practitioners as trained technicians to practitioners as reflective practitioners.

There are several important links between projects and innovations. Just think of the origin of the two terms. Today we use the word project in a number of different settings – to signify a group or an organization, to demarcate a particularly complex transaction, to refer to a visionary plan or idea. Originally, however, the term draws on the Latin word *projicere* of which the meaning might be derived to throw something forward. Innovation is often used to signify something new, either a new product, service or other output, and/or a new process and method. The word is also traceable to Latin and the word *innovo* which could be translated as to renew. In many ways the two fields of research have been kept apart leading to a neglect in the project management area to acknowledge and embrace the unique processes of projects – to cope with uncertainty instead of eliminating it by the use of advanced planning techniques (see for instance [5]). In the innovation arena, project management has often been looked upon as a simple implementation endeavor with little problems. However, research has time and time again pointed out the difficulties of moving from invention to innovation, of moving from ideas to value creating products – a process where project management potentially would have a very important role.

The papers in this special issue thus seek to contribute to the ongoing debate about project management in two ways. Firstly, by showing and discussing the intimate link between innovation and projects. Secondly, by continuing the directions to rethink project management.

### 3. Five areas of innovation/projects research

We have divided the papers into five main sections. The first is fundamentally about the link between innova-

tion and projects and how to understand innovative projects. We start with a paper by the French researcher Sylvain Lenfle who gives us an inside view of the management and organization of an exploration project. This view illustrates both the intimate link between innovation and projects, and the importance of rethinking conventional project management logics to square with the requirements of innovative projects. Such adjustments must include the separation of the organizational entity to allow for exploration, the organization of tests inbuilt in the management process, the need for concurrent exploration, to accumulation of knowledge for future value creation, and the reformulation of objectives along the way. Lenfle ends with the important differentiation between exploration and exploitation projects and that these two ideal types represent two fundamentally different types of project situations.

The exploration/exploitation theme is continued in our next two contributions. Midler and Silberzahn examine how new high-tech startups often need to undertake a series of projects to explore the product/market space before they hit upon a successful combination. They link three theoretical perspectives: entrepreneurship, project learning, and the organization of emerging firms to examine two case studies of European high-tech startups. Entrepreneurship and project learning are also key in the paper by Frederiksen and Davies where they broaden the concept of vanguard projects by examining how two firms in the UK energy sector use vanguard projects to explore new technologies or markets to generate new knowledge as internally generated initiatives rather than in response to existing client requirements.

Our second category we have labeled “innovation in project business”. Here, the interest is fundamentally about offering something new to the market. Given here that what is delivered is a complex transaction, then a new offer in many ways leads to a number of innovation dilemmas. In this category, we have two papers. The first one by Artto, Wikström, Hellström and Kujala deals with the ‘servicification’ of project business and draws on a multiple case study of five project supplier firms. The authors identify six different ‘impact types’ – customer entry, customer value, competitive advantage, delivery efficiency, service business, and innovation and learning. From this starting point, the authors show a great spectrum of different service offerings in project business, and in what ways project suppliers seek to innovate by offering new services and products. The paper also discusses the inherent difficulties in introducing innovations in project business. Eloranta, Kujala and Oijala draw on a single case study of a complex project in Uruguay to illustrate stakeholder salience and what strategies a firm can use to cope with increasingly complex and demanding project deliveries. In that sense the paper sheds important light on the ways firms go about to cope with innovation in projects, extended offerings and what strategies stakeholders can use to increase their salience.

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