Innovation in project management: Voices of researchers

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Abstract

This paper reports and reflects on the discussions about the nature of the discipline of project management that took place during the 8th conference of the International Research Network of Organizing by Projects (IRNOP VIII), held in Brighton in September 2007. The discussions started with the provocative motion "This house believes that we no longer need the discipline of project management". The arguments are organised in the following areas: the use of the traditional body of knowledge by practitioners and by academics; the use of project management as a knowledge field by practitioners and by academics. The discussions indicate that project management research is in a fruitful moment of revolution of paradigms. We wish that the new paradigm accepts the plurality of research in projects and we need discussions supporting and also refusing the 'motion', and by this means, proposing answers, rather than the answer, to the future of 'the project management discipline'.
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Keyword: Project management research

Over the last few years, a fertile debate has gathered pace about the nature of the discipline of project management [1]. Building on this kernel of self-analysis, the 8th Conference of the International Research Network of Organizing by Projects (IRNOP VIII), held in Brighton in September 2007, concluded with a debate addressing the motion:

"This house believes that we no longer need the discipline of project management"

The debate was deliberately provocative and intended as a light way to end the conference after the hard work that preceded it. However, this light-hearted debate raised some hard issues about project management itself and about research on projects and project management.

The discussion was opened with an intriguing definition of 'discipline' not as a branch of knowledge, but rather as systematic training in obedience to regulations and authority. This definition was used polemically, but it provided interesting and valuable insights, functioning as a caricature of the traditional project management concepts. Another intriguing argument was that this area and the statement posed for discussion were based on the premise that the project management discipline exists – but does it really?

On the other hand, the discipline of project management as a field of study was defended. People have undertaken projects for more than 6000 years, and projects are the key instrument for the development of society, starting from the pyramids and the Great Wall of China, and this is not going to change: people will keep undertaking projects, and it is our duty to our children and grandchildren to continue developing project management.

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		What?	
		Project Management as Traditional Body of Knowledge	Project Management Discipline as Knowledge Field
Who?	'We' as practitioners	1. Discipline needed – often rejected without disciplines being used rigorously. Some examples in complex projects were limiting at high levels.	2. Practitioners need the knowledge discipline – practice expanding and some highly challenging problems existing and emerging.
	'We' as academics	3. Management academics managing their projects using a disciplined PM approach. Perish the thought.	4. Discipline provides a point of convergence for teaching and research.

Fig. 1. Overview of the Arguments.

However, projects have been facing problems since the pyramids [2], and it is clear that the (traditional) discipline of project management as we know it today is unable to cope with all issues involved in the undertaking of projects. The discussion following the debate suggested that the discipline of project management is not passive to this critique, and has been developed, in both theory and practice, whether deliberately or not [3–10]. One may argue about what the project management discipline comprises, whether what we have at the moment is adequate. However, we need a discipline of project management as a knowledge field. Thus, the question is how to develop and how to apply this knowledge in projects.

The arguments presented in the discussion are organised in four areas, which considered a broader definition of the actor in the statement, and whether the project management discipline is understood as the traditional approaches to projects or the research field of project management, as shown in Fig. 1.

Considering area 1: in a world where 'we' know what to do, goals do not change, and information is not ambiguous, the project management discipline is extremely relevant. Some academics hold the view that such a world does not exist; a project is *per se* complex, dynamic and unique, and its management is embedded and should take into account social networks, and consequently, 'the' discipline in projects is rather harmful. Another group argued

that many projects are still in this zone – projectification has seen to that [11]. However, many reject the notion of discipline as 'too difficult', without proper evaluation. This presents a paradox – projects are still failing with some regularity (e.g. [12]), and yet the failure is often ascribed to lack of basic processes [13,14].

All agreed that where none of these aspects dominate, that is in a dynamic, complex ambiguous world, 'the' discipline of practice as currently described in the bodies of knowledge (e.g. [15,16]) does have the potential to be harmful. The conventional, linear rational approach is insufficient, at least for some aspects of the project, and what 'we' need is an approach that recognises the social structuration of projects that is better able to deal with complexities.

Thus, the 'discipline' of project management means not only following good procedures on how to manage projects (these are essential) but also adherence to a 'rational' approach to project management, which is based on 'the' discipline (as a unitary discipline), rather than multi-disciplinary. Consequently, project management as a knowledge field should include more than only 'the traditional discipline'.

The practitioners' demand for the discipline of project management as a knowledge field is represented in area 2. A good project manager needs to develop and deploy personal competences and good judgement in very difficult