

# Discussing project status with the project-space model: An action research study



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## Abstract

This empirical research article assesses the use of the project-space model as a tool for improving communication and understanding of a project's status, and the enablers and constraints to its progress. The study is driven by the Rethinking Project Management network calls for new approaches and frameworks that enable projects to be considered from different perspectives. The project-space model is already established in the literature as a project communication tool. This study uses an action research method, underpinned by an interpretivist research methodology, in a single case study environment. The model is found to be successful in enabling an improved strategic, integrated and holistic conversation regarding the case study project's status that reflects the 'lived experience'. This article contributes to the literature by providing empirical testing of an alternative tool for communication of project status, enablers and constraints.

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## 1. Introduction

This action research case study examines whether the project-space model is a practical tool for a project manager to holistically and pragmatically communicate project status and problems. In 2006, the Rethinking Project Management network proposed a research agenda for project management, with a greater focus on practice (Winter et al., 2006). However, since the network there has been limited discussion on practical, stand-alone tools or techniques that align with the thinking espoused by the network. It is important for project managers and stakeholders to be able to communicate what is constraining and enabling them to achieve their project objectives (van der Hoorn, 2016a). Traditional reporting and gateway reviews have limitations and are arguable grounded in traditional project management thinking (refer Section 3). van der Hoorn (2016a) has proposed the project-space model to address this limitation in the practitioner tool-set. The objective of this study was to empirically assess the project-space model tool in a case study environment.

The project-space model is a communication tool that presents information regarding the reason for a project's status in a visualised manner (van der Hoorn, 2016a). It shows the factors enabling a project to progress and those constraining its progress.

van der Hoorn (2016a) states that it also captures potential (future) enablers and constraints. The action research method used in the study enabled modifications to be made to the model as its impact was assessed. The use of the project-space model in the case study project was found to be successful in enabling an improved strategic, integrated and holistic conversation, reflective of the project manager's and team's 'lived experience' regarding the project's status.

Firstly, the research problem to be addressed will be introduced; and pertinent literature to the research problem outlined. This is followed by the research question, the research methodology, an introduction to the case study project and the research method. A brief introduction to the project-space model tool as described by van der Hoorn (2016a) is then provided. The findings of the action research study are then examined. A discussion of these findings against the research question, and the extant literature are presented. Finally, limitations of the study are noted.

## 2. Research problem

In 2006, the Rethinking Project Management network proposed a potential agenda for future project management research (Winter et al., 2006). As per Winter et al. (2006), the

network derived the following directions as being central to future research in the discipline: theory about practice; theory for practice; and theory in practice. These directions were in response to ongoing criticism of project management theory and the need for a focus on what actually occurs in practice: the ‘lived experience’ of project management (Cicmil et al., 2006; Winter et al., 2006). Of specific interest to this study, in describing the ‘theory for practice’ direction, Winter et al. (2006, Sec. 4.2) states the need for: “new images, concepts, frameworks and approaches — to help practitioners actually deal with this complexity in the midst of practice” and asks “what new concepts and approaches could usefully assist practitioners in conceptualising projects and programmes from different perspectives?”

Since 2006, there has been an increase in research aligned with the network’s proposed themes (refer Svejvig and Andersen (2015) for a review of the literature) and in the challenging of the conceptual foundations of the discipline (for example: Cicmil and Hodgson (2006), Rolfe (2011), van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015), Whitty (2011)). Some of this literature has proposed less rigid and more flexible approaches or methodologies to meet the needs of specific projects (rather than universal prescriptions) (Svejvig and Andersen, 2015). This literature is aligned to the call for new frameworks and approaches. However, no literature has been identified that has tested a practical, standalone tools that enable practitioners to capture and communicate their ‘lived experience’ of a specific project’s status. This aligns with Svejvig and Andersen’s (2015) argument that diffusing the Rethinking agenda in practice remains a challenge. And their call for “offering [of] alternative practices, which have been proven in praxis, showing superiority to classical project management (Svejvig and Andersen, 2015, Sec. 5)”.

Contributing to the remediation of this gap is critical if we are to mobilise the Rethinking agenda in a meaningful and practical way for practitioners. It is necessary to provide project managers, teams and boards with pragmatic and fit-for-purpose tools that enable them to embrace an alternative way to practice their craft. Without alternative practical tools, practitioners can only but continue to use extant tools of the traditional paradigms that are problematic and have not been proven to contribute to project success (Koskela and Howell, 2002; Maylor, 2001; Morris et al., 2006; Whitty and Maylor, 2009). Furthermore, it is an important step in expanding the Rethinking project literature. Undertaking empirical work associated with new ways of project managing will assist in increasing the empirical studies within the Rethinking literature. As such, we propose that there is a need to consider what new practical tools would assist project managers to communicate project status and problems, whilst reflecting the ‘lived experience’ of the project work, and in alignment with the Rethinking agenda.

### 3. Literature review

The focus of this paper is to contribute to the literature by testing a practical tool which may provide an alternative way to communicate project status and problems. As such, traditional tools that have been used for capturing the status of projects and raising problems in the project environment will be briefly reviewed. This will be followed by a review of approaches or

tools that align with the Rethinking agenda. Attention will also be given to a brief exploration of decision-making and managerial reporting more generally to assist in the identification of the research question.

#### 3.1. Traditional tools for communicating status and problems

Periodic reports to enable monitoring and control of a project’s progress are proposed in the ‘best practice’ guides such as the Project Management Body of Knowledge (2013) and PRINCE2 (2009). Generally, the focus of these reports is on comparing actual project progress or performance against the project management plans or baselines (Office of Government Commerce, 2009; Project Management Institute, 2013). Such guides also identify risks and issues as being commonly included in these periodic reports. A more contemporary development in this reporting has been the use of traffic light dashboard (red, amber, green) reporting (Lamptey and Fayek, 2012). However, generally these reports remain largely text-based. Often, these reports reduce projects to parts of the plan based on knowledge areas (e.g. scope, time, budget) or some other theoretical construct for the purpose of tracking variance. Quantitative assessments (i.e. number of days ahead/behind schedule or budget tracking) can also become the dominant feature.

The other traditional tools for assessing project progress and identifying problems are gateway reviews and/or stage gates. Williams et al. (2012) provide a discussion of these tools and their role in providing early warning signs of problems in complex project work. Their examination of eight case studies highlights that despite their purpose of identifying risks or barriers to progress, these assessments are often flawed. The reviews can be based on optimistic assessments of progress and underestimation of risk. Subsequently, their value in early detection of problems is unproven. Williams et al. (2012) propose that in addition to formal assessment, everyday communication is key. Ongoing dialogue is better at identifying problems and assessing progress than formal reviews. The value in gut-feeling approaches is also argued by Williams et al. (2012).

In summary, the two traditional tools for reporting status and identifying problems are periodic reports and the more formal gateway or stage gate reviews. It is argued that these tools align with the traditional (pre-Rethinking) foundations or theory of the discipline. Periodic reports have a focus on deviation from planning; which implicitly suggests that the plans should be followed. Reports can also be reductionist and focused on the ‘theoretical’ components such as scope or schedule, rather than how the project may be holistically experienced by the participants. Furthermore, gateway reviews, due to the potential implication of reprimand or project closure, may result in project managers disguising problems or poor performance. There may be limited incentive to disclose challenges if a ‘progress should follow the plan’ culture is present.

#### 3.2. Tools and methodology flowing from rethinking

The Rethinking Project Management agenda (Winter et al., 2006) has been an influential catalyst in driving work that

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