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Socio-political dynamics in the pre-initiation phase of organisational change projects: Approaching projects as a contested and negotiated space

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Abstract

In considering the contextual aspects of organizational change projects, it is notable that consideration of the socio-political dynamics within the pre-initiation phase is largely neglected in current theorization. In practice, a project manager is often allocated to projects post-scoping where the focus is on governance and execution; often with little understanding of the real problem statement and the socio-political dynamics of the project context. This paper provides a critical review of the current state of research relating to organizational change projects and argues that increased attention to understanding the wider socio-political context within the front-end of projects would likely influence the fundamental boundaries of the project management discipline and the role of project management practitioners. In doing so, the paper outlines a research agenda to inform future empirical work on the pre-initiation phase of organizational change projects.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a growth in the use of projects as a method to drive organisational change^{1,2,3}, representing a shift to a management paradigm within the project management domain. With historical roots in the engineering discipline, project management has been dominated by a rational, linear approach^{4,5,6,7,8}, but is increasingly applied in complex organisational settings [3]. We argue that exploring the resulting and unresolved contradiction between non-linearity and controllability within the pre-initiation phase of complex change projects could deliver a significant contribution to interdisciplinary research across project management and organisational change theory, along with stretching the traditional boundaries of project management for the practitioner.

Whilst the pre-initiation phase of projects is considered as a critical success factor^{9,10}, in practice project management often refers to the execution of a project post-scoping and in some instances a new or different project manager may be assigned after the scoping and pre-initiation phase, as reflected in the professional bodies 'Books of Knowledge'^{11,12}. If this is the case, the notion of who is or should be responsible for leading the scoping of projects becomes questionable, as does the likelihood of whether the complexities of socio-political dynamics within the project context are systematically explored and considered during this phase.

As with many fields of management, there is not one agreed definition of project management¹³. For the purpose of this paper, the following definition is selected 'a project is the whole of a group of activities limited in time and space, inserted in, and integration with a political, social and economic environment, towards a goal progressively refined by the dialectic between the thought (the project plan) and the reality'¹⁴. The chosen definition of project management is some distance from the traditional definition of being a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service¹². The driver for the preferred definition is that it incorporates socio-political dynamics, which put the project context at the core of the definition, alongside the more traditional emphasis on project execution. This paper unpacks some of the reasons why socio-political elements are crucial to the future of project management research and practice.

This short paper proceeds as follows. First, we engage with the shifting terrain within project management through a critical exploration of the project management domain, its underpinning paradigms and associated role boundaries in order to further understand the implications for the practitioner and academic discipline. Second, we consider the development of a nascent stream of project management literature which takes socio-political dynamics seriously. In conducting the literature review underpinning this paper, the first author began with an initial search for review papers using Scopus, Emerald Insight and Business Source Premier with the keywords "project management", "projects" and "PM". A secondary stage search was carried out using the initial search terms along with "pre-initiation", "front-end", "organisational change", "socio-political" "political", "politics", "environment", "context", "complexity", "uncertainty" and "ambiguity". Papers with citations and/or a publication date within the last 5 years were prioritised for review. We conclude the paper by outlining the key points from the review and developing a series of research questions that will guide future empirical research.

2. Domains, paradigms and role boundaries: A shifting terrain?

Project management is transforming from traditional infrastructure-based sectors to a management paradigm as its use to drive and deliver organisational change increases^{15,16,17}. Recent scholarship suggests that there is a need to shift from a dependence on planning and control to a more organic managerial model^{18,19,20,21}. Stryhre² identifies the opportunity project management can bring to enabling creativity outside the norms of existing organisational structures, which is key to change projects. Whilst organisations may be using discrete projects to encourage innovation and change²² the reach and impact is not discrete, with many aspects of the organisation and its stakeholders being touched.

It is noticeable that projects with substantially different characteristics are emerging, which are inherent in organisational change projects where socio-political dynamics of the project environment are key to success³. This has potential implications for the discipline's future research agenda and development of practitioner training that goes beyond the linear and often deterministic approaches thus far adopted^{23,24}. In addition, project management experience and skills are seen increasingly as a growing expectation of the modern manager²⁵, therefore the significance and reach of such research and practice is wider than purley the project management domain.

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