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A profession but not a career? Work identity and career satisfaction in project management

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Abstract

Project careers typify contemporary career theories that place the individual, rather than the organisation, as the sole architect of employability and career satisfaction. However, a gap now exists between the strategic importance of projects and the ability of permanent organisations to support and develop the project management role. Using survey data (N = 207) of IT project managers our theoretical framework hypothesizes relationships between project management identity and career satisfaction, and the moderating effect of how project managers relate to their role as a job, career or calling. Findings suggest that project managers with a high level of professional identification achieve validation from external project networks reducing the reliance on internal organisational support. However, not all project managers relate to their role as a career. The article discusses the implications for project careers, professionalization and organisation support.
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1. Introduction

A cursory web search for the term 'Project Management' (PM) yields a staggering 346,000,000 results. These include project management software as a service (SaaS), university programmes and professional certification. The search results mirror how 'modern' project management has evolved through the contribution of practitioners, professional bodies and academia. The relevance of project management to economy and society is irrefutable. More than 20% of global economic activity takes place as projects. In some emerging economies this figure exceeds 30% (Bredillet, 2010). Moreover, the 'projectification' of organisational work is today observed in almost any industry (Bakker, 2010; Sydow et al., 2004) and organisations increasingly use projects ('temporary organisations') to achieve their strategic objectives (Morris and Jamieson, 2004).

Despite the universalist approach to PM engendered by the PMI Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) the identity of the project management field is eclectic and antagonistic. For example dispute exists among professional bodies and schools of project management research (Packendorff, 1995; Bredillet, 2010). The focus of this research is the identity of the individual project manager. Projects, as temporary endeavours, have been deemed the organisational equivalent of a one-night stand (Meyerson et al., 1996: 167). The PM must alternate between idea-generation and decision-making periods (Morley and Silver, 1977) and negotiate tensions between professional and organisational culture. The failure of organisations to support PMs through traditional career management approaches cannot be attributed to the individualization of careers alone; the PM role is heavily task-centered (Gareis and Huemann, 2000) and many PMs are contract workers (Garsten, 2008). It is these characteristics that make it necessary to better understand the extent to which project managers identify with a PM profession. A strong professional identity transcends reliance on any one organisation for support (Montgomery, 1997; Ashforth et al., 2008). Career development of project managers

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is reliant on mobility across projects rather than on vertical movement provided by permanent organisations (Arthur et al., 2001). The first research question posed in this paper seeks to determine the extent to which project managers' identify with a project management profession and how this relates to career satisfaction.

While theory predicts a positive relationship between career satisfaction and identity (El-Sabaa, 2001; Hall, 2002), there is currently mixed evidence of the degree to which PMs view their role as a career. It is therefore uncertain whether calls for more formal organisational support for the project management role are useful. In fact, PMs are likely to differ in their experience of the work they do. Work orientation exists on a spectrum from a job, to a career to a calling (Bellah et al., 1985; Schwartz, 1986; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). The second research question therefore seeks to establish how the relationship between professional identity and career satisfaction is moderated by different work roles.

The article contributes to the literature by examining the concepts of identity, career and work orientation providing insight into the consequences of projectification from the perspective of those who actually project manage (c.f. Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). The findings build upon a limited number of articles that address professional identity in PM and we thus contribute to a broader understanding of professionalization beyond questions of certification or knowledge acquisition alone.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 critically reviews the key theories and concepts relevant to the research questions. The decisions taken in the design of the research are outlined in Section 3. The findings and contribution of the article to the literature are discussed in Section 4 and, finally conclusions, limitations and further research are contained in Section 5.

2. Literature review

2.1. Project management profession

Early attempts to define project management stem from the 1950's (see Oisen, 1971). Historically, 'modern' project management arose out of a need for practitioners in bureaucratic organisations to respond to novel problems. As such, PM was created in a specific time, place, and culture (Johnson, 2013). However, there are clearly gaps between the problems PM solved in government bureaucracies in the 1950's and the needs of today's small and medium enterprises (see Murphy and Ledwith, 2007; Turner et al., 2012) and software development projects (Serrador and Pinto, 2015). The publication of the first Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) in 1996 is an important knowledge base for the PM profession. One could argue that the BoK represents a corpus of concrete rather than abstract knowledge necessary to define a profession (see Freidson, 2001). PM standards materialized from common patterns among projects supported by a "critical success factor" research agenda (see Robey et al., 2002). Taken together, scholars differ on whether or not PM is a

discipline or profession (Giammalvo, 2007; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007; Bredillet, 2013).

What is generally accepted is that PM is undergoing professionalization (i.e. the process of becoming), which sees members of professional associations "swearing an oath to, or declaring a belief in, the acceptance of project management knowledge as defined, by its membership" (Whitty, 2005). The field has an established body of research-based knowledge, broad consensus on methods, formal paths of education and minimal standards of entry (Bredillet, 2013). These developments contrast with the relatively poor support and recognition achieved by PMs inside their own organisations.

2.2. Role of project manager

The role of 'project manager' was considered new in the 1960's (Gaddis, 1959). Today, the role is likened to a "jack-of-all-trades", collectively operating as an "accidental" (Kharbanda et al., 1997) or "corporate" profession (Hodgson and Paton, 2016). Typically, the PM role is thrust upon people rather than being sought (Kharbanda et al., 1997) with individuals 'rolling into PM' at later stages of career (Savelsbergh et al., 2016). At best, people view project management as a secondary career choice and as a means to escape mundane operations (Packendorff, 1995).

There is evidence to suggest that many project managers do not feel adequately respected and compensated for their work. After managing several projects individuals may still find themselves "stuck in a rut" with fewer (or no) career paths or opportunities for development (Palm and Lindahl, 2015). Moreover, pursuing PM as a career is difficult for those individuals with family commitments and generational and gender differences are also observed with regards to mentoring support (Crawford et al., 2013).

The contemporary importance of PM is not matched by organisation wide human resource (HR) support for the PM role (Fabi and Pettersen, 1992; Huemann et al., 2007). This lack of recognition impedes the development of PM as a recognised and respected profession *within* the organisation. This has led to calls for greater organisational support through designated project management departments, career paths and frameworks (Pinto and Kharbanda, 1995; Hölzle, 2010; Madter et al., 2012). Attempts by organisations to assume greater influence over projects in general, and project careers specifically (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006) are somewhat detached from the supposition that individuals no longer attach their careers to the fate of one single organisation (Jones and DeFillippi, 1996). Career self-management (Baruch and Rosenstein, 1992; King, 2004; Sturges et al., 2002) sees obligations moving from the single organisation into the hands of projects and the profession (Weick, 2001; Baruch, 1998; Baruch, 2006).

Project management has largely developed in parallel with the demise of the traditional organisational career. Various metaphors capture this shifting landscape including the protean career (Hall, 1996), boundaryless career (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994), post-corporate career (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997) and the Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005).