



The unsettling of “settled science:” The past and future of the management of projects

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Abstract

As part of the development of his Management of Projects (MoP) perspective, Peter Morris identified a broader, more comprehensive understanding of the principal project management activities and interfaces required for project success. In advancing the MoP framework, Morris offered a wide-ranging critique of the philosophy behind PMI’s execution-based model, as developed through their body of knowledge (PMBoK). This paper addresses some of the streams of research that have been influenced by the MoP perspective and how they have “unsettled” research focused on tools and techniques, and normative best practice which we dub the “settled science” of project management. We suggest that it is time to reconsider these research streams in light of Morris’ MoP framework, identifying some of the key areas that future research can pursue in reassessing what we think we know about project-based research and key project interfaces.

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1. Introduction

With his introduction of his Management of Projects (MoP) perspective in 1994, Professor Peter Morris proposed a major reconceptualization of theory and practice in the field of project management. This was not a simple reformulation of our understanding of the basic elements in the project management discipline but, once fully understood, required nothing less than a rethinking of the manner in which organizations frame and manage their projects. Morris first developed the framework and summative model in his seminal (Dalcher, 2012) 1987 case studies of major UK projects with George Hough (Morris and Hough, 1987: Fig. 12.1), developed it in his more historically orientated contribution (Morris, 1994: Fig. 46), and revealed its latest incarnation in his valedictory statement (Morris, 2013:

Fig. 4.5). We reproduce this latest version of the summative model in Fig. 1.

We suggest that this model encapsulates the core of Morris’ contribution to research and practice in project management. Its fundamental concern is to capture empirically all the activities required to achieve project success, and it led to a critique of the received wisdom in project management theory and practice that focused on its tools and techniques, rather than the organizational requirements of achieving success for the organizations involved in the project. As Morris put it in 1994:

“... while the subject of “project management” is now comparatively mature ... it is in many respects still stuck in a 1960s time warp. Project managers, and particularly those who teach and consult to them, generally only take a middle-management, tools and techniques view of the subject. Few address the larger, more strategic, issues that crucially affect the success of projects” (Morris, 1994; p. 217).

Morris (2012) argues that Cleland and King’s (1968) very influential text provided the academic justification for the tools

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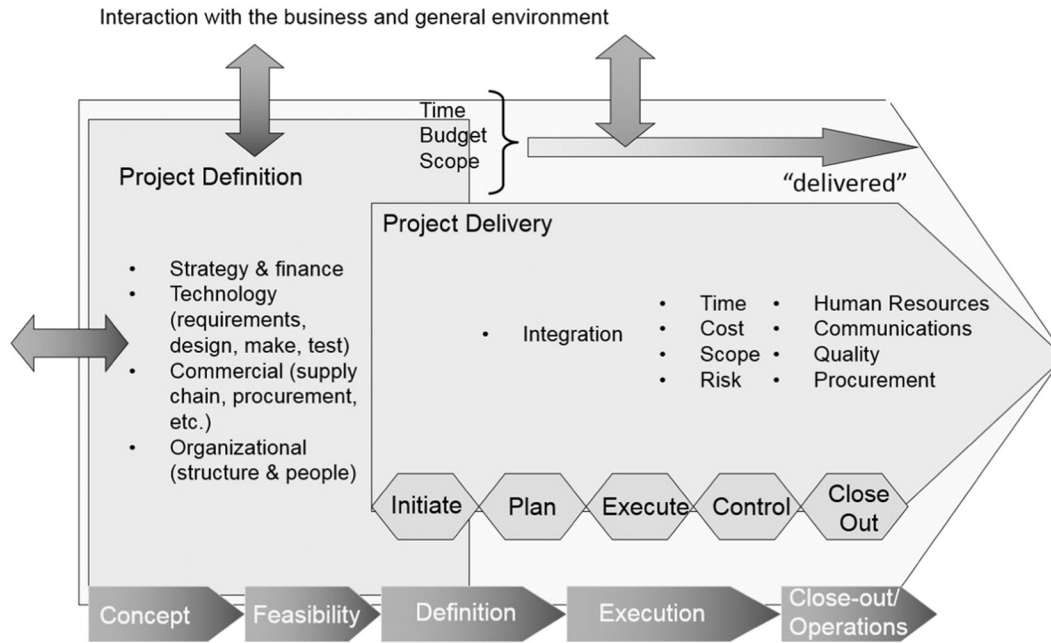


Fig. 1. Management of projects framework (developed from Morris, 2013 Fig. 4.5).

and techniques focus, while in current practice it is embodied in the PMI’s Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK). These contributions we dub as the “settled science” of project management, which Morris sought to unsettle. The PMBoK model establishes an execution-oriented approach to managing projects that misses several key areas, most notably managing the critical front-end activities that can make or break a project’s viability from the outset. In effect, PMBoK focuses so closely on the actual delivery of the project that it comes perilously close to ignoring the larger context within which the project is idealized, validated, and shaped by multiple stakeholder forces.

The purpose of this paper is therefore threefold; first, we seek to examine the research implications embedded in the

Management of Projects perspective, and in particular Morris’ emphasis on the importance of the front end of projects and thence the life-cycle of the project through to successful handover. Second, we will show how Morris has built on the Management of Projects perspective to develop a systematic critique of the settled science which underpins the knowledge frameworks that shape the professionalization of the project management discipline. Finally, this paper serves as our introduction to the special issue, putting the gathered contributions of the various contributing authors listed in Table 1 into the larger context of how their work relates to, and is shaped by, Morris’ work. First, though, we will review the “settled science” of project management that Morris was so keen to critique.

Table 1
The papers in this special issue.

Group A	Front-end definition
Richard Fellows & Anita Liu Karlos Arto, Tuomas Ahola & Valtteri Vartiainen	Sensemaking in the cross-cultural contexts of projects From front end of projects to back end of operations: managing projects for adding value throughout the system lifecycle
Graham Winch and Roine Leiringer	Owner project capabilities for infrastructure development: A review and development of the “Strong Owner” concept
Ole Jonny Klakegg, Terry Williams & Asmamaw Tadege Shiferaw Knut Samset & Gro Host Volden	Taming the trolls: major projects in the making Front-end definition of projects: ten paradoxes and some reflections regarding project management and project governance
Group B	Body of knowledge
Andrew Davies & Tim Brady Mike Bresnen Jennifer Whyte, Angelos Stasis & Carmel Lindkvist	Explicating the dynamics of project capabilities Institutional development, divergence, and change in the discipline of project management Managing change in the delivery of complex projects: configuration management, asset information, and ‘big data’
Damian Hodgson & Steve Paton	Understanding the professional project manager: cosmopolitans, locals, and identity work

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