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Rethinking Project Management Education: A Humanistic Approach based on Design Thinking

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Abstract

This paper intends to provide an insight into the importance of design thinking as a novel concept in project management education. While design thinking itself is not new, the role it can play in shaping future project managers can be vital. This narrative literature review paper paints a picture of the increase in project failures and its reasons, andragogic considerations in project management education, and how design thinking can help. Subsequent discussion highlights the need for design thinking in project education. The paper's conclusion is that it is indeed time to rethink project management education, especially through the incorporation of design thinking to produce better project managers and reduce project failures in the future.

Keywords: Soft skills; design thinking; project failure; project management; education

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, project failures have been attributed to human aspects of projects. Two of these humanistic issues occur either at the beginning of the project life cycle, where the project is designed or at the end where the project is transitioned into the business. There is a significant body of work that has examined the issues of transition and the need for change management. When projects fail it has been commonly understood as project management failure, however a number of forces may influence failure. It appears that traditional project management education does little to prepare project managers for the reality of projects, particularly in equipping them with soft-skills[1]. One aspect is the ability to engage with customers and users, to ensure that the project deliverables will address the customers' real needs. This means the project manager must in many cases question what the customer originally states as requirements. The project manager, or those they employ to analyze the business need, must dig deeper, regardless of whether they have a personal understanding of the users' needs or not. Project management has borrowed from other disciplines, such as business management, manufacturing, accountancy, and human resource management, to form the modern body of knowledge. In this trend, project managers can borrow from design disciplines, in particular design thinking, to improve the capacity of project managers to engage effectively with users; and ensure they are addressing the key problem as defined by the user.

The purpose of this literature review paper is multifaceted, firstly, it highlights gaps in the project management literature. It does not propose to provide a historical overview of project management. However, it does refer to the historical issue of project failure that has yet to be resolved, and that contemporary literature suggests is increasing. The primary purpose is to propose an argument in terms of how filling these gaps could potentially drive research into methods to improve the likelihood of project managers achieving successful project outcomes. The review identified a lack of literature discussing the use of design thinking in project management, with one of the first significant additions by Ben Mahmoud-Jouini, Midler, and Silberzahn[2]. The literature review will argue that design thinking should be utilized as a hybrid imaginative method for developing soft skills in project management students. Introducing another process, such as design thinking, into the project management curriculum is thought provoking and may be controversial in traditional project management circles. This stimulation of scholarly discussion is an intended consequence of the narrative literature review[3].

The paper is structured as follows. Section two outlines the research method adopted for this paper. The ensuing literature review is subdivided into sections that cascade together to take the reader through the literature analyzing the concepts of project failure, project management education and design thinking. These concepts flow in a narrative which forms the basis for the proposed arguments and applied research. The significance of project failure in industry is initially highlighted in section three. This leads to section four which argues the need to change the way project management is taught with an emphasis being placed on a greater need for soft skills. Design thinking is proposed as the mechanism to develop soft skills within project management curriculum in section five. A discussion of project failure, project management education and design thinking is in section six. The final section concludes with an argument to support further research into the effective inclusion of soft skills development via design thinking in project management curriculum.

2. Research Method

Literature reviews can have multiple purposes, including provision of historical perspectives of a topic[4]. This literature review considers important extant literature exploring the intersection between project management education and design thinking and soft skills. The analysis of the literature reviewed in this paper is narrative in style and is not meant as a systematic review. Narrative analysis enables the meaningful convergence of evidence across diverse methodologies utilized in the existing literature[5]. Narrative reviews consist of critical analysis of the literature[6], are mainly descriptive and studies are chosen based on availability or author selection[7]. As is common with narrative reviews, this paper does not seek to highlight the ways that literature selection may have influenced the findings.