

Making Sense of Project Realities

*Theory, Practice and the Pursuit of
Performance*

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Projects: The Opportunities and Shortfalls

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROJECT WORKING

This book is for people who work in the world of projects. Its aim is to provide insights and understandings that will support their ability to act effectively in that world.

There are many people, in a wide variety of roles, whose lives are touched for better or for worse by projects. There are some for whom the performance of projects is central to their working lives: strategists who hope to see their policies and plans turn into reality through the medium of projects, investors who, personally or through their organizations, put up the money that funds projects, and project managers and an array of others who have responsibilities for seeing that projects are delivered. There are others whose roles are supportive: providing training and development, running the professional bodies, researching new methods and practices, and advising organizations and individuals. The ideas put forward will, I hope, be of value to them all.

Over the last few decades (since the 1980s) the growth of the project mode of working has been phenomenal. Some fields, such as construction and engineering, are traditional territory, and it can be argued that for this type of work the concept of the project has been in use for several centuries, or even millennia. However, even in these domains there has been a step change in recent years in the recognition given to the discipline and methods of project management, which have now taken up a central position. There are many of us who can remember a time when the engineering disciplines themselves managed major construction projects. People who were explicitly called ‘project manager’, if they existed at all, had a supporting role preparing plans of instruction and perhaps looking after contractual relationships with clients. This culture has now changed radically. The project management discipline – and within it the individualistic heroic project manager – now takes overall responsibility, as a matter of routine, for the delivery of such projects.

The field of information technology (IT) systems development has broad similarities with engineering in its concern with the delivery of technology

– the transformation of technical concepts into socially useful products. The rapid expansion of the project management discipline within this field has therefore been unsurprising. In practice, however, IT development is often intrinsically tied up with organizational change, and so it makes little sense to apply tight project controls to technical developments alone, in isolation from organizational developments. The logical response to this problem has been a further expansion in the scope of the project management discipline to apply it to the organizational and human aspects associated with the introduction of new technology, and it has now become normal management practice to plan and implement organization change and business transformation through the medium of projects.

Such has been its success that there are now many large organizations, including major corporations and government departments, for which project management and its companion programme management are the only means through which policy is implemented. There are numerous organizations in which it is claimed that *all* work is a project, or in which (perhaps more accurately stated) the *only* means by which funding is formally authorized is through the processes of project approval. If it isn't a project, then it has no authority or budget. In this idealized world, the strategists – company executives, government ministers or senior civil servants – formulate policies and strategies and then pass these to the project management fraternity, with their legions of project managers, who are to ensure delivery. Under this simple division of labour tasks as diverse as the provision of health services, the reorganization of emergency services, the delivery of aid to developing countries and the provision of accommodation for the homeless have been brought into the project domain, their territory conquered and assimilated into the ever-growing project management empire.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE

This remarkable expansion has been accompanied by the emergence of strong and influential institutions. In the UK and the USA, two major organizations – the Association for Project Management and the Project Management Institute respectively – have emerged, claiming to act as custodians of project management as a profession, providing an ideology, an intellectual framework and a home for project managers. These enterprising organizations formulate and codify knowledge and practices, set out the criteria and qualifications for different grades of membership, and act as gatekeepers, controlling entry and exit and awarding certificates to those who meet their standards. Their

membership is large, numbered in hundreds of thousands, and increasing rapidly, reflecting not only the expanding scope of the discipline but also the rising status of those who practise it. Project managers see themselves as an elite group; they are, after all, the people who are responsible for 'getting things done'. 'Project manager' has become a role to which large numbers of people aspire – a high-value career path, a means to a first-rate reputation and a vital step up the ladder towards the top of the tree. Project management qualifications are valued both in their own right, or as an essential addition to a more traditional profession in engineering, IT, or social services, or virtually any other field.

The independent associations are not alone in the quest to create a new profession. Major corporations and government departments are also actively setting and promoting their own standard practices, appointing Directors of Project Management and encouraging their staff to learn the methodologies and gain qualifications. Through these means they drive forward the growth of project forms of working in their own organizations.

The discipline has thus established itself at the centre of organizational life, in many respects emulating the major science-based professions such as engineering or medicine. The object of its special expertise – the project – has been identified, our knowledge of this object and how it must be handled has been extensively systematized and written into codes of standard practice, and individuals who are expert in the application of this knowledge are granted entry to the privileged profession (or refused it) on the basis of their level of understanding of this knowledge.

The overall case that is made for project management is very simple and very powerful. The project mode of organizing has been shown, both historically and currently, to be the best way to deliver the aims and strategies of organizations. The basic practices and skills of project management have been defined and applied across government and business, and within many technical and organizational disciplines. We have developed, and continue to develop, a group of people who have passed through the gateway into the professional enclosure, expert in the discipline's practices, who apply their skills to the benefit of business success, and we have established independent associations, which act as custodians, holding the profession's knowledge, promoting its benefits, and training and regulating its practitioners.

And yet all is not well. This simple picture of success is open to serious challenge.

THE CHARGES AGAINST PROJECTS

The charges – the critical flaws – are as follows.

PERFORMANCE DEFICIT

First, it can be argued that the growth of engineering and medicine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries supported major advances in society: in the case of engineering, the building of national infrastructures and machinery that had been inconceivable or impossible in the days before the profession produced them, or, in the case of medicine, the achievement of dramatic improvements in public health. Can the same be said for the emergence of the project management profession? Are major projects now completed to time and cost? Are government strategies more successfully implemented? Are new technologies slotting smoothly into reorganized businesses and government departments?

Unfortunately not!

It is difficult to say what we are doing better as a result of this surge in project management. The world appears to be continuing much as before. There are successes, but also widespread failures. In the 1820s George Stephenson completed the Manchester to Liverpool railway late and 45 per cent overspent against budget. Today, little has changed. Major public sector projects regularly overspend, often by 30 per cent or more (and sometimes by a factor of more than ten), or do not deliver their promised benefits. Major investments are initiated based on untried technology which later turns out not to be sound. New IT systems are developed at great expense, but then rejected by their intended users as unusable. It seems that projects, as human endeavours, are inherently unpredictable and flawed both in their execution and in their outcome, and modern project management has not, as yet, done much to change this.

The response to this charge from the mainstream establishment – project management experts, consultants, project directors and others – has been to demand more of the same. If management controls are ineffective, then we need to strengthen our resolve and apply more controls. If the uncertainties in our plans are overwhelming, then they must be listed on a schedule and managed. If the project managers are failing, they must be removed from their posts and replaced by new blood – people who are properly trained, and who can be better trusted to follow the approved rituals.

This response has proved to be largely futile. It should itself be recognized as part of the problematic culture of project management. If we hold to a philosophy of strength, order and control, then any shortfall in achievement will be interpreted as a failing in that strength. Perhaps it is time to look for a way out of this rut, and ask whether there are alternatives.

This first charge, the performance deficit, is well recognized. It is raised regularly in the media, in parliament, and between treasury officials and investors. These people, in joining in the hue and cry, add their voices to the demand for stronger project management.

ALIENATION

The second charge, however, has less visibility. It concerns alienation.

For every committed believer in the value of projects, there are others who are non-believers. By non-believers, I do not mean the outright rebels – those who oppose or resist, on principle, any communal or business activity or initiative. I am thinking of the disaffected: those who ask, quite regularly, ‘Why should this be a project?’ and don’t get an answer that satisfies them, those who believe they are doing a useful and productive job and find that the imposition on to their work of the concept of a ‘project’, with all its associated attributes, is irrelevant, distracting or even disruptive; and those consultants in wider fields of management who ask themselves whether an organization would perform better if it adopted the project model for strategic delivery, and find the answer is a resounding ‘no’. Their complaint is that projects are *not* the only way to turn ideas and strategies into reality, and are often *not* the best approach, so why do the project profession and its allies in government and business seek to impose this model on everything? The consequence is that in all organizations that purport to be project-based there remains a large community of people who are alienated from this policy – critically detached. To them project management is something imposed from outside, merely one, perhaps, of the many management initiatives that have been inflicted on them with numbing regularity.

Rather than take up a partisan position, arguing for or against project management, we should explore this question more thoroughly, in less black-and-white terms, and ask what the appropriate territorial frontiers of the project kingdom might be. Are there perhaps alternative and more flexible formulations that might be more pragmatically useful to different people in diverse circumstances?

THEORY–PRACTICE DISCONNECTION

The third charge to be laid against mainstream thinking in project management is that of theory–practice disconnection. At an event organized by a project management organization the presenters spoke enthusiastically about the training they could provide, discussing the tools and techniques they covered and the qualification levels that participants in their training could achieve. During the interval, a project manager of the older generation commented on the high quality of the presentations. However, he then looked into the distance and added: ‘but of course none of this bears any relation to anything I ever did’.

This is a crucial allegation. It appears that the tools and techniques – the things they teach on project management courses – are only rather loosely related to the things that experienced expert practitioners actually do. This dislocation is not just a challenge to those who practise the crafts of project management. It is a challenge to those who would write books on the subject. There is a vital need to identify and make visible the capabilities that people actually employ on projects.

A WAY FORWARD

This brief overview of the state of ‘project-world’ is, of course, very much an aerial view – a snapshot from a helicopter hovering at a safe altitude above the real world. On this otherwise pleasant landscape, with its aura of optimism and promise, our criticisms – performance deficit, alienation and theory–practice disconnection – are major disfigurements.

It is tempting, from this height, to look for a solution to these problems – a new theory, the final piece of technique we need to banish the flaws from the face of the earth. The history of projects shows us, however, that this is not a realistic hope. My purpose is to help those on the ground who are struggling to find their way forward. These two perspectives, the aerial and the grounded, are both needed. I shall argue throughout that if individuals are to enhance their capabilities and effectiveness, then they must raise their eyes and look beyond the immediate surroundings – the prescribed, procedural, mechanistic trappings of mainstream project practices. To move on it is necessary to enhance our understanding of the wider context in which projects are created and performed. It is the illumination of this complex terrain – foggy, messy and ambiguous, and beset by conflict, intrigue, doubt and ignorance – that is our goal.