PM World *Journal*
Vol. IV, Issue I – January 2015
www.pmworldjournal.net

For whose benefit? Reclaiming the
role of users in projects
Series Article   Prof Darren Dalcher

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

For whose benefit?
Reclaiming the role of users in projects

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Why do we develop projects? Project development and delivery typically result in the creation of new assets and capabilities. Yet, to what extent do we shape the delivery process to reflect the needs and expectations of the ultimate users?

Answering the question is not easy: Perusing the bodies of knowledge reveals very little about users and their role in projects.

The Sixth edition of the APM Body of Knowledge published by the UK's Association for Project Management begins with the following sentence: "*Project, programme and portfolio (P3) management is concerned with managing discrete packages of work to achieve objectives.*"

Later guidance elaborates on the role of the project manager, who "*must be competent in managing the six aspects of a project, i.e. scope, schedule, finance, risk, quality and resources*". The first real mention of users comes up in the section on change management, which asserts: "*projects often conclude with the delivery of an output that is handed over to the client or user organisation.*" Even the index offers little further help in elaborating the role, impact or significance of users to a project. The Glossary proves more useful by confirming that users are "*the group of people who are intended to receive benefits or operate outputs*".

The Fifth edition of the PMBOK Guide, the PMI's Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge confirms that users are included amongst the project stakeholders, as "*users are the persons or organizations who will use the project's product, service or result*". *It also expands on their role explaining that they may act as representatives or liaisons to ensure proper coordination, advise on requirements, or validate the acceptability of the project's results*".

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[1]*The Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the current monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063. See Prof Dalcher's author profile at the end of this article.*

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The project management bodies of knowledge offer scant information about dealing with users, understanding their needs, obtaining their feedback, establishing buy in, managing their expectations, or even communicating with users.

Other domains place a greater emphasis on users and their central role in projects. In technology, engineering, information systems and computer science terms such as ease of use, usability, usefulness, and user satisfaction are typically associated with the developing attitude towards using a delivered system and the perceived success of the system or the technology. User acceptance is reckoned to develop over time as a result of accumulated satisfaction, and perceived annoyance related to a product, technology or system.

Agile methods recognise the centrality of users to development, and make a concerted effort to include them in the development process, often tailoring the process around users. Indeed, the Agile Manifesto emphasises "*customer collaboration over contract negotiation*". The highest priority of agile teams as expressed through the first principle is to "*satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software*". Consequently, agile development features frequent and regular releases which can be evaluated and assessed by users and the entire approach. Early and frequent user involvement builds user commitment, whilst offering a continuous improvement cycle that results in more successful deployment.

Agile is often offered as a more valid alternative to traditional development and project management methods precisely because of the recognised central role of the user.

To counter the claims of the agile camp, project management would do well to remind itself that it should be about *delivery* not *deliverables*.

While *deliverables* provide an ultimate emphasis on the handover of a product, asset or artefact, *delivery* is concerned with usage and what happens next – lasting beyond the release or handover date. Above all delivery offers a longer-term perspective on projects, users and the delivery of benefits.

Project management is concerned with working with people in organisations to enable delivery of useful results. If the ultimate goal is to ensure that our assets are used, it is incumbent upon us to warrant they are built in ways that encourage use, that the real needs are ascertained and embodied in our processes and that the ultimate users participate throughout these processes.

One significant implication is that handover is not the end of the process, but part of the usage or utilisation phase. Such rethinking would require the adoption of a wider perspective that could accommodate a longer-term perspective of products, deliverables and use.

Part of this recognition is already taking place as project managers are increasingly expected to consider benefits. Realisation of benefits typically occurs beyond handover,

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and yet it is gradually creeping into the on-going conversation about projects and their value.

This month's article provides a thought provoking perspective on projects. The article written by Dr. Phil Driver and Ian Seath provokes readers to consider the wider context for projects within organisational strategy and action. The authors provide a rich model for projects that extends beyond deliverables as they remind us that *projects* deliver *results*, which are then *used* by customers and users to create the ultimate *benefits*.

The paper draws on Phil Driver's recent book *Validating Strategies: Linking Projects and Results to Uses and Benefits*, published by Gower. The book emphasises the development of organisational strategies and the connection to projects, a much-neglected area in project management literature. Moreover, it provides a comprehensive system for thinking about projects, benefits, results and uses –thereby addressing the aforementioned concern with users. The book makes an important contribution to the project management world by associating projects with organisational strategies. More importantly, it also provides a way for organisations to view projects and benefits in a strategic light that supports and underpins the purpose and aim of the organisation and can ensure that all projects contribute in that direction.

The PRUB model, explored in the article, offers a useful way of re-establishing the role of users in the life of a project. It also underpins the conversation about projects, benefits and organisations. The model, which is simple and applicable, makes an important contribution to project management theory and practice by offering common semantics for reasoning about projects in organisations. Benefits can be defined more easily, when it becomes clear that uses need to be taken into account. Ultimately a reminder that it is use that provides benefits, and not the project, or the result makes for an important lesson.

The model also enables organisations to traverse in either direction refining both strategies and benefits, and ensuring that projects fit in between. The model can also play a part in determining the value of projects and ensuring they result in uses.

Users are an important, yet often forgotten part of projects – as they are the key to utilisation of benefits. Previous articles in the series talked about the need to engage stakeholders early, the importance of timely expectation management and the focus on improved communication. Clear models that map the relationships and generate an improved understanding the terrain are essential to the development and growth of project management. They can also play a part in combating the failure rate of projects and change efforts.

In an age when the establishment of customer loyalty is crucial to success, reclaiming and repositioning users in projects is essential. The results of projects need to be considered from a wider perspective. Making change sticks appears to be a growing organisational challenge; ensuring that users are primed to support and embed change through project delivery will remain a challenge to the profession.

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Peter Drucker observed that "*strategy is a commodity, but execution is an art*". Art, like project management, extends beyond the simple delivery of an artefact, encompassing an entire system of nourishing and cherishing values in a long term dialogue. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma noted that "the role of the musician is to go from concept to full execution. Put another way, it's to go from understanding the content of something to really learning how to communicate it and make sure it's well-received and lives in somebody else."

Execution can thus extend beyond simply carrying out one's role, or delivering temporal artefacts, to making sure that that some thing is well received and lives on. Ensuring that users are ready to embrace this new role would ultimately require attention, education, participation and the open sharing of values and perspectives.

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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 "movers and shapers" in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine's "Academic of the Year" for his contribution in "integrating and weaving academic work with practice". Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice,* an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond. He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an editorial advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.

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