

Alternative scenarios for the future of the project management industry

By Alan Stretton and Terence Blythman

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses possible project management futures in the context of both programs and projects. Two apparently conflicting perspectives/ scenarios have been evolving in the program/ project industry, and these look set to influence this industry well into the future.

The first scenario is that the management of projects and programs will continue on its historic journey of becoming increasingly specialised. Proponents of this scenario focus on unique aspects of the program/ project disciplines, and on retaining and continuing to develop a distinctive profession of program/ project management. Some benefits of, and problems arising from, this scenario are discussed. One particular problem with this scenario is that the world at large, including most organisations, will probably continue to regard program/ project management as they do now – as simply a useful tool, and/or as a specialist, execution-only avocation, which has little substantive material to contribute to mainstream management at large.

The other scenario, which has been gaining increased (although still limited) coverage in recent times, is that programs and projects are being increasingly integrated into the management of organisations at large. Proponents of this scenario see a continuation of a trend for program/ project managers to become increasingly involved in “front-end” management activities (e.g. organisational strategic planning, project definition, etc) right through the delivery end (implementation/ utilisation of program/ project outcomes). In this scenario, project managers would become more involved in broader management processes, with program/ project management methods becoming increasingly incorporated into those of general management.

It seems most likely that these two scenarios will continue to co-exist for some time. Will they continue to diverge, or will some sort of amalgamation or balance ensue? What appears to be needed is a balance, but how might a balanced outcome be achieved? It seems too early to hazard a reasoned prognostication. Much will probably depend on how the project management industry matures. In the meantime, wider recognition that there are these two different scenarios might help move the industry towards developing more balanced approaches. It is hoped that this paper may help in this by drawing attention to current imbalances.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions in the literature which serve to inform the futures of project management can be classified in various ways. In the following we identify two broad scenarios for the future.

- Scenario 1: Focus on tools, techniques and specific methodologies, which serve to increase specialisation of program/project management as a distinct and separate avocation/profession;
- Scenario 2: Program/project management viewed as a strategic deliverer of benefits increasingly integrated with the management of organisations at large, in both front-end and delivery-end activities.

In this paper we will discuss these evolving scenarios, consider what is driving them, what they mean for the project management industry, and ask what the industry should expect from itself.

SCENARIO 1: INCREASED SPECIALISATION OF PROGRAM/ PROJECT MANAGEMENT AS A DISTINCT AND SEPARATE AVOCATION/ PROFESSION

The evolution of specialisation in project management evidently has a long history. The formation of IPMA (originally INTERNET) and PMI in the late 1960s might be seen as the beginnings of more formal movements towards such specialisation. The development of bodies of knowledge of project management by these institutions began in the early 1980s, followed by certification processes based directly, or indirectly, on these bodies of knowledge. Both were very specific movements towards specialisation of project management. Books, journals, papers and articles on project management proliferated, as did conferences, congresses and the like. Formal education in the subject also proliferated, particularly in the last decade or so. The movement to specialisation in project management has indeed been profound.

Factors contributing to increased specialisation of project management

In this analysis, we draw on our knowledge of the Australian experiences in this area, which we believe is not substantially different from those which were experienced rather earlier in North America and Europe.

Australia's Project Managers Forum (PMF) was formed in 1976, with six aims and objectives, all of which were concerned, directly or indirectly, with sharing information, mainly locally, by providing a forum to facilitate this; organising workshops, seminars and congresses; publishing bulletins and congress papers; and promoting association with kindred organisations, both locally and internationally (Hovey 2010). In summary, the motivation of PMF was

- to facilitate the sharing of information on project management

When the Australian Institute of Project Management was formed in the late 1980s, it added the following aims (in *d2info – Background Information on the AIPM*):

- to advance the discipline of project management as distinct from general management
- to promote the self-development of project managers and the members of the project teams
- to increase the public and governmental awareness of the value of project management
- to encourage the study of project management, and
- to promote the professionalism of project management

So, in addition to sharing of information on project management, we see the emergence of a desire to stake out distinctive pieces of territory, to promote self-development and study of project management, increase broader awareness of its value, and promote its professionalism – in other words, to pursue specialisation of project management.

There may well be other drivers towards specialisation. However, the above seem to reflect typical drivers, which we assume would have been broadly shared by other project management institutes and associations.

Some benefits from specialisation of program/project management

Sharing of information about project management

For many practitioners, including ourselves, this has been of the greatest benefit. Judging from the attendances at the dozens of workshops, conferences, etc which we have attended, this has been an enormous benefit to most project managers. The same applies to written information, where we have been fortunate to have so many publications devoted to this specialised avocation.

Educational initiatives in project management

These have grown practically exponentially, to the point where educational opportunities at all levels up to PhD in project management are readily available – all good!

Moves to professionalism

These have mainly taken the form of credentialing process initiated and managed by project management institutes/ associations. In the Australian context, one of the main motivators for credentialing was to counter the situation where incompetent people claimed to be ‘project managers’, to the detriment of competent practitioners. In any event, project management credentialing is now well and truly established world-wide.

But it is not without its problems, as we will see.

Some perceived problems with specialisation of program/project management

A bias towards execution-only perceptions of project management

Morris et al 2006 discuss PMI's *PMBOK Guide* (e.g. PMI 2004) thus:

The *PMBOK Guide* reflects a strong execution orientation, having hardly any material on strategy and project definition, the management of external factors, or human behaviour. The PMBOK view of the discipline has become extremely pervasive, so much so that many people do not see project management as the discipline of managing projects but as the discipline of delivery a project 'on time, in budget, to scope', leaving it to other disciplines to deal with the establishment of these targets.

As this quotation indicates, the *PMBOK Guide* is very widely used, and its execution-only viewpoint of the nature of project management has been widely accepted as the norm. As indicated by Morris et al above, this rather narrow perspective on the scope of project management appears to have some negative consequences. For example, many of the accreditation/credentialing processes for project managers and project team members are based, either directly, or indirectly, on PMI's *PMBOK Guide*, or competency standards derived there-from. This tends to perpetuate a credentialing status quo based on narrow perspectives of project management.

A bias towards focusing on past practices, rather than current environments

Further, this also tends to perpetuate a credentialing status-quo which is essentially rooted in the past, and may not necessarily be relevant for the present and future. For example, Fern 2008, discussing the 4th Edition of the *PMBOK Guide* (PMI 2008a) says

[This edition of the *PMBOK Guide*] ignores evidence that processes documented in *PMBOK* have become obsolete in the face of global competition,

This is a real cause for concern, which is only rarely addressed in the literature.

Implications for credentialing processes

Many credentialing assessments are based, at least in part, directly or indirectly, on the *PMBOK Guide*. The above perceived problems with Scenario 1 would therefore also apply to the voracity of credentialing processes, and cast some doubts about how relevant such assessments are in current project management contexts.

However, they appear to be inviolate as matters stand.

Implications for education in project management

Much the same arguments apply for education of project managers at large as apply to credentialing processes, just discussed. How many of the educational materials used in project management are obsolete, or irrelevant in current environments? Cicmil & Hodgson 2006 discuss how “Most textbooks and professional associations for project management promote the normative view of the field as practiced”

Educational initiatives in project management are very varied indeed, and there is no data that we know of which give any credible overview of the nature of current educational materials in the broadest context. However, there are rather obvious grounds for suspecting that at least some of these materials are likely to be obsolete, in the sense of not being relevant to current contexts.

Why do so many projects continue to fail?

The above perceived problems prompt the question as to why so many projects continue to fail, in spite of the very substantial increase in credentialing processes in the past two decades or so, and in the (sometimes) associated education of project managers at large.

We do not appear to have specific data on trends in frequencies of project failures over the past few decades, or causes thereof. However, we have substantial anecdotal evidence that failures continue to plague us, and we have not seen any convincing explanations of why project failure is still so pervasive.

It appears that current credentialing, and educational, processes are not providing the results – i.e. improved project performance – which their originators had intended, or hoped for.

Effect on how businesses perceive and interact with project management

There is clearly also another associated problem of Scenario 1’s narrow perception of the scope of project management, which has the potential to severely constrain this avocation. As Morris et al 2006 suggest,

.... if project management is defined using the PMBOK paradigm, then it is not particularly surprising that senior managers are reported as thinking that project managers should not be involved in strategic issues or project definition, or procurement, as research by Crawford (2005) recently reported.

In effect, under this scenario, business leaders will continue to see project management as a highly specialised, execution-driven avocation, as outlined by Waddell 2005, who suggests that “in the spectrum of management theory, project management tends to apply to output and achievement of tangible goals”. This scenario does not recognise that this avocation has the potential to deliver so much more to organisational efficiency and effectiveness. (This will be pursued further in following discussions on Scenario 2).

SCENARIO 2: PROGRAM/PROJECT MANAGEMENT INCREASINGLY INTEGRATED WITH MANAGEMENT OF ORGANISATIONS AT LARGE

Factors contributing to this scenario

Push for increased program/project management involvement in front-end and delivery-end management

It has long been recommended by many in the literature that program/ project managers should be increasingly involved in both front-end and delivery-end management activities. As long ago as 1993, Morten Fangel published a “Comment” on “The broadening of project management” in *The International Journal of Project Management* (Fangel 1993). He identified ten broadening trends, which included the following:

- *from a focus on the period from contracting up until commissioning, towards handling the entire lifecycle from conception to the full-scale utilisation of the project outcome,*

Peter Morris has long championed the broadening of both the time frame and scope of project management applications. For instance, in Morris 2004, he says:

Project management has to be about delivering business benefit through projects, and this necessarily involves managing the project definition as well as downstream implementation.

A little more recently, Winter, Smith, et al 2006, discussed contemporary thinking in project management, and particularly three groups of studies in relation to the discipline of project management as a whole.

These studies emphasise a broader view of projects, recognising the importance of the front-end, and of managing exogenous factors, as well as the more ‘execution-focused’ endogenous ones. From this latter strand has emerged the broader ‘management of projects’ framework,

Regarding involvement of program/project managers in the front-end, I discuss the benefits of involving them in organisational strategic planning in Stretton 2011j. That paper included the following quotation from Jaafari 2010:

It is wrong to assume that project managers should not get involved or be interested in project selection, development and continuous business alignment,

With regard to involvement in downstream implementation, the literature has been paying increasing attention to program/ project benefits realisation/ management. As long ago as 1993, Turner emphasised the importance of “obtaining the benefits” from project deliverables (Turner 1993).

In the past decade or so, the literature on program management in particular has placed heavy emphasis on benefits realisation/ management, particularly PMI 2008b and OGC 2007. So, there has been increasing attention paid to the importance of having program/project management involvement in facilitating full-scale utilisation of the project outcome (to use Fangel’s phrase).

Potential for integrative contributions from program/project management research

A situation which could contribute to integrative contributions appears to be developing in the program/project management research area. For example, a recent chapter in the OUP Handbook on Project Management by Pellegrinelli et al 2011, entitled *Programme management: An emerging opportunity for research and scholarship*, includes in its research agenda an enquiry into the relevance of organisation theory, organisational change, strategic management, leadership, and competence, to program management.

Another example comes from Winter, Anderson, et al 2006, entitled *Focusing on business projects as an area for future research: An exploratory discussion of four different perspectives*, The authors have used the terminology *business projects* to embrace a conceptual shift to a

new class of projects (and programmes) in which the primary concern is no longer the capital asset, facility etc, but increasingly the challenge of implementing business strategy, improving organisational effectiveness, and managing the realisation of stakeholder benefits.

The authors discuss four different perspectives in relation to business projects, namely

- a value creation perspective,
- an organisational change perspective,
- an intervention perspective, and
- a service delivery perspective

We welcome the notion of program/project management incorporating materials from other disciplines to bring new insights into the nature of this avocation. However, it is far from clear how the outputs from such research initiatives would be carried over into actual practice.

To date, the record on incorporation of program/ project management research into management practice has been underwhelming, and has made minimal impact on the development or education of Project Managers.

Potential benefits from increased integration

Greater influence on the contributions and destiny of project management

If project management becomes involved in the front end of programs/ projects, it will then have the potential to make further contributions, by actively demonstrating how project management approaches can contribute to management methods at large, rather than simply talking about it.

As Fangel 1993 expressed it, this would facilitate a process which he described as follows:

- *from* perceiving the methods of project management to be unique for the project management profession, *towards* seeing the methods as integrated elements in management methods in general.

Indeed, Fangel spelt out some possibilities in the following 'trend'.

- *from* focusing on the skills of specific methods and techniques, including EDP tools, *towards* the open-minded selection of the management methods needed, including methods of strategic planning, marketing and personnel management.

Potential to develop an augmented or new profession

If this integrative scenario develops further, differences with general management could well become increasingly diffuse, to the point that perhaps a more integrated, holistic management discipline could emerge.

Many years ago, Snyder 1987 asked the question,

Are we at a point where project management is obsolete and a new management system is needed for the future?

Cleland 1991 appeared to answer Snyder's question in the affirmative, because in an article entitled *What will replace project management?* he suggested that,

At some point it [project management] will lose its identity as a special case of management and will become simply a cultural consideration in 'the way we do things in organizations'.

These last two quotes could be interpreted as implying that an amalgamation of program/ project management with other management forms might go beyond a subsuming of the former into general management, but might initiate the emergence of a more holistic development of general management at large – i.e. that project management in its current form may well morph into something different.

Some perceived problems with increased integration

It has been suggested to us more than once that the thought of project management morphing into a different discipline does not sit well with those who see the temporary nature of projects as being their defining attribute. However, it could also be argued, as Prieto 2008 does, that major programs/ projects are often semi-permanent in nature, and “analogous to building a new company with a sharply defined business objective”. The semi-permanent nature of such programs is then not so far away from the general management situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE?

The specialisation scenario

It could well be argued that there will always remain a place for specialised program/project managers who do not wish to expand their roles into more holistic involvement in the broader context in which they operate. This may well remain the case, and we believe it will. Perhaps the most common example might be the management of component projects within programs.

However, Barnes & Wearne 1993 suggested that there is always a possibility that the increased specialisation approach could lead to its own demise:

Experience shows that no technique with a distinctive name achieves what its enthusiasts hope for it, or lasts as long as they expect. The same could be true of project management itself.

A somewhat similar kind of concern about the future of project management was expressed by Tuman 1993, as follows:

It would seem that project management is not keeping pace with the advances in technology nor the changes in the corporate environment. Unless project management can formulate unique tools, like it did in the '50s and '60s, and develop a philosophy and a culture tuned to the needs of the changing corporate environment, it will soon disappear. We need to re-engineer project management. Specifically, we need a new model for project management, we need a new vision, and we need simpler and smarter tools.

Be that as it may, currently the specialisation scenario remains the dominant one, and may well remain so for some time.

The integration scenario

Turning to the integration scenario, the natural evolution of this approach is to have the identification, assessment, selection and prioritisation of projects performed in a disciplined manner by suitably competent project professionals, thus integrating project management practices in to the broader business context. This would then lead to the development and adoption of program and portfolio management capability, following professional methodologies developed in recent times by the OGC and PMI.

However, there appear to be couple of factors inhibiting project managers from becoming more actively involved at these levels.

One inhibiting factor is internal to project management. There are less than holistic perceptions by many, if not most, program/ project managers on the role of project management in the world at large. There are certainly indicators that this has been changing, but changes have been slow. For example, Peter Morris, who is certainly one of the best known and informed persons on project management on the planet has been arguing this case for many years. However, there still appear to be relatively few who are actively doing something about it. Will this change? We think so, but probably slowly.

A second inhibiting factor is the external perception of the place of project management in the overall management scene. As noted above, project management has done a poor job in educating non-project people about the potential benefits of the project management approach. There are indicators that this educational process is making some ground, but it is inhibited by the strength of the project management specialisation movement, and the perceptions it projects (intended pun). How is this process likely to develop? Probably very slowly, we believe, as conflicting perceptions about the role of project management are likely to continue to confuse non-project people.

Divergence, convergence, or balance between the two scenarios?

Currently, there are substantial elements of divergence between the two scenarios.

The most likely outcome appears to be that the specialisation scenario will continue to consolidate its position, particularly on managing component projects within programs. On the other hand, the increased integration scenario looks set to continue to grow, albeit slowly, particularly on large projects and programs. This implies a continuation of divergence between the two scenarios.

A longer-term continuation of such divergence would probably not bode well for project management. It could either lead to so much inconsistency across (and within) organisations that project management will never be taken seriously; or each scenario could evolve so as to morph into other business processes, making project management irrelevant.

What appears to be needed is a balance. The project management industry is still maturing, and has not yet established consistent practices, accreditation or even consensus on professional competencies. As long as there is poor amalgamation across the two scenarios, this will remain a problem.

How might a balanced outcome be achieved? It seems too early to hazard a reasoned prognostication. Much will probably depend on how the project management industry matures. In the meantime, wider recognition that there are these two different scenarios might help move the industry towards developing more balanced approaches. It is hoped that this paper may have helped in this by drawing attention to current imbalances.

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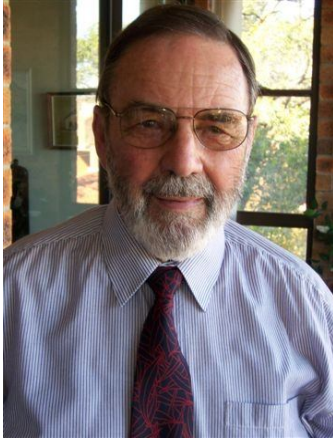
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About the Authors



Alan Stretton, PhD

Faculty Corps, University of Management
and Technology, Arlington, VA (USA)

Life Fellow, AIPM (Australia)



Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 100 professional articles. Alan can be contacted at alanilene@bigpond.com.au.



Terence Blythman

MetaPM
Melbourne, Australia



Terence Blythman is an award winning Project Manager and Principal Consultant with MetaPM in Melbourne, Australia. He provides strategic Project Management support to clients on Project, Program and Portfolio Management, specialising in construction, procurement and ICT infrastructure, and has a long history of delivering successful projects within Government and Private industry. Terence has a Masters in Project Management, majoring in Sustainable Development from Bond University, Gold Coast Australia. He is a certified Practitioner in Prince2, MSP and P30, and has recently presented at and chaired a round table discussion on the Future of Project Management at the 2012 PMoZ conference. He is a member of the Australian Project Management Association (AIPM). email: tblythman@metapm.com.au.

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