

## **Notes on general management, project management and professionalism**

*By Alan Stretton*

### **INTERPRETATIONS OF 'PROFESSION'**

In a recent paper in this journal (Stretton 2013g) I identified two quite different interpretations of how the nouns 'profession' and 'professional' are understood and used.

I described one of these two interpretations as a 'specific' interpretation of 'profession' (following an indicator in the New Shorter Oxford Dictionary). The essence of this interpretation was that it involved specialised study/ education/ training and/or advanced knowledge in relevant professional domains.

The 'generalist' understanding (again following the New Shorter Oxford Dictionary) was that 'profession' embraces any avocation, or occupation, as a means of earning a living.

This note is concerned with the 'specific' interpretation of 'profession' as it applies in the project management context, and with some issues which may be relevant to this.

### **PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL MANAGEMENT**

In another recent paper in this journal entitled "A specialist-generalist perspective of project management" (Stretton 2013j), I made the point that a good deal of the knowledge associated with project management can be represented as knowledge of basic 'generalist' (i.e. general) management, and supporting disciplines, being applied in the 'specialist' project context.

For quite some time, project management institutions have been increasingly active in promoting the objective of having the project management avocation designated as a profession in its own right. If the assertion in the preceding paragraph is valid, then we can ask an interesting question.

If project management were to be designated as a profession in its own right, should not general management, which is a major component of project management, be also designated a profession?

We now look at the question of general management being represented as a profession in its 'specific' interpretation.

## **GENERAL MANAGEMENT AS A DISTINCTIVE PROFESSION?**

From the early 1960s (and probably before that), at least some authors in the general management field have attempted to promote management not simply as a distinctive avocation, but as a profession in its own right (e.g. Allen 1964 - *The Management Profession*).

Evidently these authors were using the word 'profession' in its specific interpretation, as discussed in Stretton 2013g.

In that article I included definitions of 'profession' from five dictionaries. In four of the five definitions which covered the specific interpretation, medicine was given as an example of the latter.

In this context, some interesting connections between medicine and management were made by Topping 1998, who quoted from Professor John Kay, first Director of the Said Business School at the University of Oxford, as follows:

I think if you look at pre-scientific medicine you see considerable similarities with management today..... Those fashionable doctors prescribing all-purpose remedies were fashionable because of the prominence of their patients, rather than any benefits they brought. Charlatanism in business advice exists for the same reason it did in medicine – people are so desperate to be told there are easy answers to these questions that they suspend their scepticism. Yet out of that quackery came a reasonably scientific study of medicine. ....

Kay continued with the quotation as follows:

The jewel in the crown of business studies is the theory of finance, which is now a clearly established intellectual discipline. The application of economics to business is on the intermediate ground. There's still a lot of charlatanism, but you can start to see how this subject can be properly defined. In the softer areas – organizational behaviour – there hasn't been the same advance. That's one of the questions for the Oxford Business School – can we get sociology, psychology, perhaps even some of the evolutionary socio-biology that's been developing, to feed into the study of organizations?

As Topping notes, Professor Kay's career has increasingly become a crusade to bring about a reasonably scientific study of business management.

With regard to the 'softer area' of organisational behaviour, a good deal of what are commonly described as 'management sciences' relate to this area. They could be called 'soft sciences'. If you compare these with the field of hard sciences, in the latter competing theories can be empirically tested for their validity. However, as Hatfield 2013 notes,

This is not so in the so-called management sciences, since the number of parameters involved in testing any theoretical approach within a macroeconomic environment is prohibitively expansive – it's simply impossible to isolate the contributing elements affecting macroeconomic transactions to the extent necessary to validate a given approach.

On the bases of the above, general management has still quite a long way to go before qualifying as a profession in a sense which is in any way similar to that attained by medicine.

### **WHAT ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN THIS CONTEXT?**

Judging from the above, project management can certainly expect little help from its 'generalist' component in promoting itself as a profession. Giommalvo 2011 has commented on

.... false or misleading claims about project management being a stand-alone profession, when even general management has yet to be recognized as a stand-alone profession.

Additionally, as has frequently been pointed out in the literature, project management has very little empirical data to support its existing bodies of knowledge and competency standards. As Morris 1999 observed:

Current BoKs [Bodies of Knowledge (of project management)] have been notable first, for the lack of empirical data upon which they are based, .....

Basing project management knowledge on empirical data implies an objective and robust statistical analysis of quantitative data from large samples of representative projects.

There appears to have been some movement in recent times to develop more empirical data on project management, but there's still a long way to go. In the meantime, lack of such empirical underpinning does appear, at least to some extent, to disadvantage movements towards having project management recognised as a profession in its specific interpretation.

### **SUMMARY/CONCLUSION**

These notes first alluded to a recent paper in which I made the case that project management is primarily the application of basic 'generalist' (i.e. general) management skills in 'specialist' project environments.

Materials were then presented which indicate that general management has some way to go before qualifying as a profession, at least in a sense which is in any way similar to that attained by medicine, for example (i.e. in the 'specific' interpretation of 'profession').

In this circumstance, project management can expect little help from its 'generalist' component in promoting itself as a profession.

Further, a lack of empirical underpinning for its more 'specialist' component appears to further disadvantage aspirations for having project management recognised as a profession in the 'specific' sense of this descriptor.

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## About the Author



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