

## ***Advances in Project Management Series<sup>1</sup>***

# **Is it a time to rethink project management?**

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On the evidence of the authors of the new Gower book *Advances in Project Management: Narrated Journeys in Unchartered Territory*, there is a sea change coming. That change will affect the way projects are perceived, lead and governed, particularly in the context of the wider organization to which they belong; whether that is in the public, private or not-for profit sectors.

### **The era of project management**

Project management is increasingly being recognised as a key competence in many organisations in both the public and private sectors. Trends such as downsizing, reduced management layers, greater flexibility, distributed teams and the challenges of rapidly evolving technology have taken project management beyond its routes in the construction, engineering and aerospace industries and are playing a part in transforming the service, financial, IT and general management sectors. Academic courses, professional training and accreditation programmes are blossoming as practitioners seek to enhance their knowledge, skills and competencies. Television programs such as *The Apprentice* have made the acronym PM, representing a person, a role or a function, familiar to most viewers, while *Fortune* even rated project management as the number one career choice at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Project management offers the discipline and framework required to help organisations to transform their mainstream operations and service performance. It is viewed as a way of organising for the future. Moreover, in an increasingly busy, stressful and uncertain world it has become necessary to manage multiple projects successfully at the same time.

Project management is a core competence required to deliver change measured in terms of achieving desired outcomes with associated benefits. With projects increasingly viewed as managing the change efforts of society, project management is increasingly called upon to cross functional, organisational and societal boundaries and handle the inherent complexity and uncertainty required to bring about a new reality.

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<sup>1</sup>The *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. This month's article is by **Prof Darren Dalcher**, editor of the Gower *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. Darren is also the editor of the newly published book, *Advances in Project Management: Narrated Journeys in Unchartered Territory*. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>.

Yet despite the growing interest, many organisations have struggled to apply the traditional models of project management to their new projects in the global environment. Anecdotal and evidence-based research confirms that projects continue to fail at an alarming rate. A major part of the build-up to failure is often recognized as the lack of adequate project management knowledge and experience.

Some organisations have responded to this situation by trying to improve the understanding and capability of their managers and employees who are introduced to projects, as well as their experienced project managers, in an attempt to enhance their competence and capability in this area. Many other practitioners have experimented with new approaches such as agile management, lean development and collaborative working modes seeking new ways of working, managing and directing.

### **In search of new ideas**

There are many reasons why we need to refocus the discussion on improving the management of projects: modern organisations feature flatter structures, new technologies, rising complexity, greater collaboration and increasing interactions all requiring greater responsiveness. We also need vision and direction to drive our efforts.

The world of projects has changed dramatically. The old models appear less relevant and the dated tools seem less useful. Successful delivery in increasingly competitive and global environments require us to align with organisational strategy, focus on practitioners, and create the right environment to foster the skills and attitudes needed to succeed at the grand challenges facing us.

We seem to live in a faster and more demanding world, characterised by rising levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. Indeed, project management is increasingly called upon to deliver in a world that is connected in complex new ways; where the so-called 'unknown unknowns' determine our context. Professor Eddie Obeng defines the new world as a world that can change faster than you can learn. As we engage with an ever-growing portion of this world, it becomes more difficult to satisfy all stakeholders whilst delivering value and benefits in a new and unfamiliar context.

We live in an increasingly unpredictable and complex environment replete with change, ambiguity and uncertainty. Consequently, there appears to be a greater need to be concerned with defining the new kind of project management required to survive, succeed and excel in this new environment.

We increasingly talk about the new world and the new realities of the twenty-first century. The new world offers many new challenges that we seem to encounter on a more frequent basis: speed, uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity. Moreover, the new world is increasingly characterised by limited attention, growing collaboration and participation, new social media technologies and the expanding scope and influence of projects. The challenges combined with the new characteristics point to a much-needed departure from project management orthodoxy.

Success in the future would require better understanding of the context and deeper engagement with the business. It will also require new ways of developing professionals, making change work and guaranteeing value.

### **Bringing it together**

*Advances in Project Management: Narrated Journeys in Uncharted Territories* published by Gower aims to explore how the profession can think and act in this demanding new world. The book thus offers insights and ideas about how the profession will rise to the challenges of the new world – climate change, technological advances, globalisation, social networks, public health, security and economic regeneration and growth. The challenges require fundamentally new ways of making sense and shaping a world we neither control, nor fully understand.

*Advances in Project Management* covers key areas of improvement in understanding and project capability further up the management chain; amongst strategy and senior decision makers and amongst professional project and programme managers. This collection, drawn from some of the world's leading practitioners and researchers provides those people and organizations who are involved with the developments in project management with the kind of structured information, new approaches and novel perspectives that will inform their thinking and their practice and improve their decisions.

Many of the articles in the book have emerged from the search to refining and redefining the boundaries of project management. Articles offer new reflections on developments that stretch contemporary understanding offering fresh insights, new ways of thinking and novel perspectives.

The articles collated in this publication bring together many leading authorities on topics that are increasingly relevant to the successful delivery and management of projects. Topics such as sustainability, leadership, governance, programme management, decision making, problem solving, psychology, messy problems, the role of senior management and ethics are explored alongside more traditional aspects such as risk, supply chains, earned value and performance measurement.

The main aims of the work are to reflect on the state of practice in the discipline; to offer some fresh insights and thinking; to distil new knowledge; and, to provide a way of sampling a range of ideas, perspectives and styles of writing from some of the profession's leading thinkers and practitioners.

Taken together the book offers both a unique distillation of ideas and 'know how' from a wide range of authors on many topics that extend beyond the bodies and knowledge, and an accessible introduction to further resources in these areas. As the range of topics extends beyond those normally covered, it is likely that the book will identify new perspectives that readers may not have considered, and thereby suggest additional reading to augment the interests and concerns of practitioners and researchers.

## Enter the new project management

Many issues and insights are highlighted throughout the contributions. A key theme that emerges from the different discussions is the need to move from managing to leading. Managing is the hallmark of a more certain and more control-oriented strategy, while leadership points to a different and more varied skillset. Lack of control and a greater reliance on a network of participants require a more organic approach that emphasises influence, participation and collaboration. Gradual exploration can therefore be guided by vision and purpose that can help in forming and confirming the direction of travel.

Success in the future would require better understanding of the context and deeper engagement with the business. It will also imply an acute understanding of the values and preferences of different, yet much wider circles of stakeholders communities, possibly arranged in complex and interconnected ecologies. The set of concerns is likely to encompass sustainability and survivability issues, extended time horizons and considerations of wider communities of interest. The old tools and approaches that characterise the pioneering mindset that shaped project management will require adjusting to encompass new ways of balancing ethical, economic and environmental considerations, and reflect a changing understanding of the economic mechanisms that underpin engineering and development activities from a humanistic perspective.

Rosa Luxemburg observed that ‘those who do not move, do not notice their chains’. Progress and change rely on identifying the gap and moving towards bridging it. H. G. Wells pointed out that we should strive to welcome change and challenges, because they are what helps us grow: “We need to constantly be challenging ourselves in order to strengthen our character and increase our intelligence”. Thomas Edison acknowledged that “restlessness is discontent – and discontent is the first necessity of progress”.

This compilation offers the collated and narrated beginnings of a discussion on how to achieve more with less and overcome some of the observed discontent related to project work. As we become more ambitious, we will need to leverage our insights and understanding and develop new ways of addressing the emerging challenges. In doing so we may discover that sharing across boundaries and silos will enrich and refresh our metaphors, tools, perspectives and values – so that they can support and underpin our continuing journeys as we endeavour to learn to deal with change over time and begin to develop new ways of reasoning about projects.

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*Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK and the editor of the newly published book, Advances in Project Management: Narrated Journeys in Uncharted Territory, published by Gower in 2014. Information about the book can be found at <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781472429131>*



## About the Author



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