
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Whose success is it anyway? Rethinking the role of suppliers in projects

*By Prof Darren Dalcher
Director, National Centre for Project Management
University of Hertfordshire, UK*

The discourse on success in projects is becoming increasingly more diverse and far reaching. Benefits take time to realise, accumulate and transform into value, sustainability is assessed over the long term horizon, business value takes time to accrue, and the behaviour of system users and visitors can only be ascertained over an extended period.

Different groups of stakeholders raise different concerns and preferences and depend on different value sets and expectations. Over time any and all of the above are likely to shift and change, making for increasingly complex dynamics.

It is little wonder that the profession grapples with the idea of success in projects and programmes.

Everyone is a project manager now

Another interesting shift that is often acknowledged is the proliferation of project management. More professions and disciplines appear to have discovered project management as a way of progressing from plan to execution. The result is that an increasing number of professionals in many disciplines have been labelled project managers.

The idea of accidental project managers has been discussed in many forums. In reality it often translates into having a multitude of practitioners utilising the same label. Where different companies collaborate on projects, it is becoming increasingly common to see project managers operating on each side. With multiple project managers, it becomes legitimate to ask whose project is being managed, and question if success would look the same from each perspective. Indeed, if each project manager is defining benefits and targets, whose benefits should be pursued?

The various bodies of knowledge offer very little guidance in this area. Recent papers and articles have little to add around this topic.

¹The *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 currently 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>.

Different types of project success?

In order to obtain a more meaningful answer we may need to revisit some of our historical writing. Morris and Hough analysed eight cases of large projects to discover that there are several different perspectives, which must be employed when assessing whether a project is a success. They single out three different types of measures that apply across the cases that are paraphrased below:

- **Project functionality:** The financial or technical performance from an owner or sponsor perspective.
- **Project management:** The degree to which implementation meets the budget, schedule and technical specification
- **Contractors' commercial performance:** The commercial benefit to the service provider (in either the short or long term).

The measures would roughly translate as project success (vaguely related to the idea of effectiveness), project management success (efficiency) and financial outcomes for the contractors. Note that the definition of project success thereby encompasses both the financial and performance characteristics of a project.

The specific measures identified in the work of Morris and Hough focus on project functionality and project management, in addition to the financial performance of the contractor, a much-neglected area in the current project management literature.

What emerges from the early work of Morris and Hough is that success, and by implication failure, can be viewed from many perspectives. Indeed, there are many levels of measurement for evaluating project performance, and determining project success. Morris and Hough note that these may vary from contractor and project manager, to the owner, his financier, the government and the wider community.

Yet, modern project environments are increasingly more complex, involving multiple stakeholders, participants, users, managers and clients. Complex contractual relationships imply that chains of suppliers and producers, or networks of collaborators are intertwined in a relationship that relies on a combined notion of success and integrated delivery.

Managing such an undertaking implies recognition of the relationships between each major party and the project. Given the proliferation of project management, it is increasingly likely that many of the partners will be applying project management methods to manage their side of the interface. Moreover, it is increasingly likely, especially in larger projects, that each will employ a project manager to guide their contribution.

In an increasingly complex topography that employs multiple project managers, it becomes necessary to question some of our assumptions: Whose perspective is being served? Who is the real project manager? Where should performance be measured?

And whose project success matters most? Indeed, it would appear that very little work has expanded on the ideas put forward by Morris and Hough almost thirty years ago.

Over the last thirty or forty years, attention has shifted from focusing on projects and project phenomena as the units we research and study, to considering the view from the project manager's perspective and viewing projects as temporary endeavours, to adopting a stakeholder-friendly stance, and more recently to developing a contingency perspective that is responsive to context, complexity, strategy, leadership and change perspectives. Despite the significant progress and the insights derived from changing the lens and the units of study, some aspects appear to have escaped the gaze of researchers.

So, whose success are we measuring?

This month's article, "Does one size fit all?" written by Adrian Taggart, is an extract from his recent book, *Project Management for Supplier Organizations: Harmonising the Project Owner to Supplier Relationship* published by Gower. Adrian asserts that traditional project management tells the story from the project owner, or client perspective. This chimes with the need to focus on deliverables, use, users, acceptance, benefits and the delivery of value to users. Yet, the perspective invoked by Morris and Hough of contractor organisations and their financial performance is still missing from project management conversation. While many of the interests of suppliers and owners are shared and they clearly work towards a set of common targets in the context of project thinking, there are many differences of perspective and needs.

In extending beyond the financial performance of supplier organisations, it becomes possible to utilise a wider perspective that encompasses the need to include marketing and selling. The role of the project manager strongly depends on the commercial relationship to the project. Indeed, Adrian argues that the way projects are arranged to focus on deliverables could be argued to change the assignment of supplier project managers to managing a contract as opposed to a project.

The delivery of projects for clients requires an extension of the activities that typically revolve around managing projects. Adrian's book offers an extended supplier's organization life cycle. Indeed, many of the concerns emanate from permanent structures and ways of addressing projects across multiple projects that apply within the contracting organisation on a much-extended timeframe. The key contribution of the book is in encouraging thinking around the additional aspects of supplier development and delivery required for success in project contexts. The extended project life cycle for supplier organisation is one crucial aspect that comes to the fore as you reengage with the content offered in the book, but the balance between temporary projects and permanent client delivery mechanism hints at a fascinating and on-going dualism that requires addressing.

Recognising that the supplier organisations' project delivery life cycle is at best partly synchronised with the product delivery life cycle, or the one used by the owner organization, re-positions the conversation around success in projects and hints at new topics and areas that might be ripe for further exploration. Multiple life cycles, imply

differing perceptions, needs and expectations across main groupings surrounding the project. The longer-term perspective invokes further concerns and suggestions for new work and research topics. A key contribution of Adrian's work is in making us rethink and re-visit many of the assumptions and perspectives that underpin the dialogue around success, and in providing fresh insights to mull over.

References:

Morris, P. W. G. and Hough, G. H. (1987), *The Anatomy of Major Projects: A Study of the Reality of Project Management*, Chichester: John Wiley

Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

About the Author



Darren Dalcher, PhD

Author, Series Editor

*Director, National Centre for Project Management
University of Hertfordshire
UK*



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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