

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Time to rethink the social element of projects: Building on ambient awareness and social media

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

Last month's contribution identified a certain preference within classical management thinking towards organising and control. This reflects a fascination with execution and control, rather than recognition of uncertainty, potential and human capability to deal with and benefit from the unexpected. In reality, perfect plans do not exist, and instead the act of planning provides the focus and flexibility needed to prepare and adjust for the future. Yet the notion of a perfect organisation offers an attractive and alluring proposition to wishful managers.

The social psychology of Organisations

In 1966, Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn published a book that would become the foundation for organisational behaviour and organisational psychology thinking. *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, offered deep analysis and reflection on the essential problems of human organisations. The book offered a wealth of new perspectives on organisations, their relationship to their environment and the effect of organisations on the health and well-being of individual members. In addition, it also explored the demands and opportunities fostered by organisations, and the experimental development of alternative structures to conventional bureaucracy.

Katz and Kahn made a powerful case for viewing the organisation as a living entity. The book encouraged researchers to consider the phenomena of organised groups. Economists tend to view the world in terms of units of production or assets, missing out on the people and their role within organisations. The book attempted to create a bridge between the micro approach of the psychologist, and the macro account of the sociologist and economist. By applying open systems theory and thinking models, Katz and Kahn were able to reconceive human work patterns, suggesting that the problems associated with organisations could be viewed as a function of the type of structuring. The way functions are designed can thus influence working relationships, politics and the outcomes of the interaction between labour and management. The use of systems thinking lens also allowed for consideration of inputs and processes that lead to outcomes and products.

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. See Darren's background summary at the end of this article.*

Katz and Kahn observed a wishful tendency for controlling the environment within which organisations are placed. In reality, organisations are not self-contained or closed systems and must instead acknowledge their role within the wider environment and recognise the boundaries and interactions that delimit their actions, and insights.

The book was important in offering an alternative way of thinking to the prevailing scientific management of Taylor and classic bureaucracy of Weber. Classical thinking did not question existing structures, and was therefore unable to deal with restructuring or social change and re-organisation. Openness to new inputs and the role of individuals offered transformational contributions to the discipline of organisational behaviour, the appreciation of change and its impacts, and the consideration of relations and positions of individuals and groups. While not strictly a project management text, the book has paved the way for many important discussions related to projects and the organisations and structures within which they occur.

Classical project management reflects its early roots in working with traditional management concepts and ways of thinking, emphasising the tendencies to control, structure, command, and divide work in a centralised fashion. It echoes a reductionist, mechanistic approach to thinking about work rather than a more socially-aware stance that acknowledges the implications and strengths of new structures and relationships embedded within organisational arrangements.

The new social dimension

The demand for a greater emphasis on stakeholder engagement, expectation management, relationship management, change management, and benefit realisation points at the need to consider new methods of organising for project work.

New technologies, including social media; an increased focus on sharing assets, platforms and even work tasks; and agile and lean work practices offer new possibilities. Such possibilities encompass new opportunities to re-conceive the work space, and re-create relationships, temporary structures, collaboration mechanisms, and sharing capabilities for the benefit of all.

The innovations that can transform product delivery and customer experience into a more cohesive development effort can also have profound impacts on the discipline of project management itself. With greater emphasis on distributed project environments, virtual teams, and the connectivity offered by social media, project teams can adopt new non-traditional work practices that allow projects to prosper in new contexts.

This month's contribution, *The Social Project Manager: Balancing collaboration with Centralised Control in a Project Driven World*, authored by Peter Taylor encourages such new thinking around projects. The article makes the case for considering the social context of projects whilst utilising new thinking and social media. The new perspective relies on sharing, marketing and selling, and the development of a wider collective purpose. It relies on thinking about the social component in new ways and addressing communication and interaction on three different levels.

The contribution draws on Taylor's book with the same title, published by Gower. The book makes a good case for rethinking project management at the enterprise level and harnessing the power of a collaborative community. It thus offers new thoughts on organising projects, managing project performance and guiding progress, whilst encouraging team collaboration and engagement through the leveraging of new technologies.

Embedded project work in organisations with ambient awareness

The work of Katz and Kahn provided a great impetus for the development of organisational theory and recognition of the interaction between the formal and informal structures in organisations. Social media offers the potential to transform all facets of life through greater connectivity and interaction.

If Katz and Kahn were important in identifying the wider open links to the environment, a transformative shift enabled by new technologies and capabilities delivers an opportunity for a transformational rethink of what can be shared, achieved and advanced by a connected and linked community.

Online communities have combined to show what can be delivered through networks of engaged participants working on shared goals. Technology offers an infrastructure for delivering new ways of working. But it also offers new ways of organising for change, and for creating new types of organisational and project team entities.

The term *ambient awareness* describes the social awareness existing between connected participants who share events, activities, photos and comments in relation to many facets of life. Individuals engage in networks that contain a constant pulse of information about each other or a common cause. Extending such relationships to surround specific projects or engagements can create greater intimacy and participation in projects.

Such arrangements can still involve project managers, but they are also capable of delivering better informed and more deeply connected teams able to engage with projects in new ways. Participants can follow the conversation, become more intimately connected, contribute, share and enhance the ambient awareness, leading to improved knowledge, learning, development and decisions.

While we await the significant changes that can come from a real rethink encompassing the power of projects and the use of social media, we can also begin to revise our models of how projects can be approached and what social project managers may be able to achieve. The new ultimate tome on the social psychology of organizations in the age of social connectivity is yet to be written, but many of the new insights are already out there, ready to be shared—offering a serious potential to rethink and improve the way projects are being run. Project managers and teams can now start to engage with the new and emergent social fabric of project work.

References:

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About the Author



Darren Dalcher, PhD

Author, Professor, 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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