

Where the Bodies of Knowledge Are Buried & How Blockchain Will Resurrect Them¹

by [John Schlichter](#)

Leading thinkers in the realm of project management gathered somewhat secretly in Virginia Beach in the year 2000 at a meeting hosted by NASA as part of an implicit attempt to broker agreement among the developers of the major project management standards across industry. The question was "What constitutes the definitive project management body of knowledge?" *Secretive* may be too strong a word because it was not a covert meeting per se, but it was named the "Operational Level Committee" precisely to make it sound uninteresting and to avoid attracting attention. More accurately, the "OLC" was the name innocuously given to the group a year earlier at the PMI Annual Symposium in Long Beach, California to reserve a room where plans to recruit a critical mass of intellectual influence peddlers was hatched. The anti-advertising worked, and half a dozen people sat uninterrupted by interlopers in an unremarkable room making a remarkable list of invitees.

In Virginia at a much nicer facility, about thirty of those invitees showed up, including David I. Cleland, [J. Davidson Frame](#), [Max Wideman](#), [Rodney Turner](#), [Lew Ireland](#), [Olaf Pannenbäcker](#), [Peter W. G. Morris](#), [Christophe Bredillet](#), and [me](#). I think Hans Knöpfel, Gilles Caupin, and Lynn Crawford may have been there as well, but my memory fails me, and there are many whose names I am forgetting. Described by one attendee as "the new blood," I was nearly half the age of anyone in this august assembly. I was breathing that rarefied air because I had been recruited to its milieu two years earlier by persons interested in having me develop the philosophical first principles of project management. As it happens I did not develop those principles (we didn't get further than an initial principle that "*A project does not necessarily need a project manager.*" An idea ahead of its time?), but I agreed instead to investigate the possibility of creating a maturity model for project management that would be a PMI standard, and that endeavor took off quickly. I recommended to the 1998 PMI Standards Committee that we should create a maturity model for project-based organizations but that its purpose should not be simply to improve the management of projects in organizations. I asserted that its purpose should be to help organizations improve their ability *to implement an organization's strategies through projects* (which is quite a different thing), and I coined the term "Organizational Project Management" (OPM) to denote *organizational strategy implementation through projects*. This was a significant departure from PMI's direction to date. PMI's Executive Director asked me to create and lead a team to produce such a model (which I named "OPM3"), marking PMI's first step toward a "strategy implementation through projects" paradigm. Marketing that paradigm is PMI's dominant logic today, and countless consultants, academics, and authors have followed suit. Things were moving full steam ahead by the time I arrived at the OLC.

At the outset of the meeting in Virginia Beach, the point was made that the "body of project management knowledge" exists in many places, not least in the minds of practitioners like those gathered in the room and across the world. The best we can do is craft guides, summaries, or

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abstractions of the inherently dispersed and evolving body of knowledge. An exercise was undertaken wherein the attendees wrote the concepts of project management down on sticky notes, one concept per sticky, filling up a large wall, signifying our attempt at canvassing the project management body of knowledge. I suggested we make a copy of all the sticky notes and break into two groups of people so each group could organize the concepts on its own, and then we could compare results. Somebody near me immediately said "Organize this? That will never work." I said "Why not? Aristotle did basically the same thing with *genus, species, and differentia*." There was a collective shrug, and we set about organizing concepts.

“The project management body of knowledge exists in the minds of practitioners across the world.”

The décollage stretching across the wall could have been interpreted in an infinite number of ways. Terry Cooke-Davies had showed up, and I suggested to him that it would be quite interesting to put the concepts from the stickie’s into word analysis software to reveal affinity groups. The next day he was genuinely angry with me for proposing that idea because it inspired him to stay up all night doing data entry despite the fact he'd enrolled nobody to help.

I was asked to present the results of the group that I had worked with. I explained our bottom-up approach of organizing the concepts in a way that allowed a structure to emerge without a preconceived design. Then Cleland presented on behalf of the other group and deadpanned "Our group created a structure top-down, which is very good because it was not bottom-up, which is very bad." He looked at us impassively with just a hint of amusement.

“Brokering a shared view of knowledge is a negotiation.”

Needless to say, each group had produced something quite different from the other, and neither mirrored what the word analysis software suggested. At the risk of emphasizing the obvious, that was the original quandary: knowledge is, phenomenologically speaking, intentional. Or said another way, knowledge is a matter of perspective. Brokering a shared view of knowledge is a negotiation, and it is not always pretty. To paraphrase, "*Standards* are like sausages. It's better not to see them being made." Flying thirty experts to a meeting hosted by NASA to decide what the project management universe looked like "once and for all," and thinking it would be any different from your typical sausage-making, was hubris.

It was not the last time NASA was involved in semi-secret knowledge management activities. A decade later I was invited to join the Federal Knowledge Management Working Group, a virtual community (which included people like me from the private sector) whose mission was to educate and support federal government departments, agencies, organizations, and their constituencies in the research, development, identification, and implementation of knowledge management activities, practices, lessons learned, and technologies. Members included [David Bray](#), [Jeanne Holm](#), [John Bordeaux](#), [Denise Bedford](#), [Jimmie McEver](#), and many others. When Haiti was devastated by an earthquake, we were asked for creative ideas regarding how to coordinate the uncoordinated relief efforts speeding toward the island. Apart from random queries like that, we formed groups that explored how individuals and institutions can more easily distill knowledge from complexity and make policies and decisions using knowledge based processes. Some of us created standards for meta-data embedded in digital

communications. We talked about how to preserve the knowledge of warfighters in Afghanistan when soldiers rotated out of service. We argued about the merits of tokenized communications used by airport control towers as a model for decentralized knowledge sharing, and what not. People asked questions like "How could simulation-scripting exercises in virtual worlds accelerate the development of the sustained use of ontologies in the real world? How might simulation-scaffolding ontologies, in turn, improve the pace and complexity of learning associated with large-scale modeling event scenarios and mission-rehearsals that are anticipated in virtual world settings? How can we leverage ontologies to help improve knowledge management, and in so doing, allow organizations to make better decisions?" I thought the group was sponsored by the US military but later discovered it was run by the FBI with support from the Secret Service and servers donated by - guess who - NASA. Organizations throughout the government and across the private sector are heavily invested in knowledge work and, by extension, in the codification of knowledge and development of standards that enable that work. This is the same phenomenon that fomented the OLC.

“Power concerns itself with defining reality rather than with discovering what reality really is.”

Meanwhile, the efforts of the OLC never produced a single definitive standard that integrated everyone's views about the project management body of knowledge. The IPMA had theirs, and PMI had theirs, which was published as a guide that ballooned to over 1,000 pages. Others have been proffered over the years. Such standards can have far reaching consequences, becoming the basis of individual and organizational certifications, shaping how organizations work (particularly how people from different organizations work together) across the world. As such, the creation of standards is a deeply political affair that may have as much to do with aggregating power as distinguishing prevailing practices. Bent Flyvbjerg has noted "Power concerns itself with defining reality rather than with discovering what reality *really* is." The major project management standards today are rather less the result of high-brow conclaves like the OLC and more the result of powerful business mechanisms, producing distillations of knowledge that take on lives of their own.

What it means to be a "standard" is something I explain in terms of roads. In ancient times, roads became de facto standards as the way that travel occurred, standards in reality by fact of widespread use. That is foremost what a standard is: the prevailing practice. Tacit knowledge of the paths taken by travelers was translated into explicit knowledge in the form of maps that codified popular routes. That too is what a standard is: a paradigm or framework whose authority is asserted. The standard practices of traveling known routes were accompanied by rules or standards de jure (that is, officially or by law) like weights, measures, and coinage that enabled commerce. That is yet another way of understanding standards, i.e. as abstractions contrived to enable interaction. Today, project management standards are an amalgamation of these things that begs the questions "This is the prevailing practice *according to whom exactly?* This knowledge has been codified *by whom exactly?* Its authority is asserted *by whom exactly?* And if a standard has been adopted as the rules of the game, they are the rules *according to whom?*" Fundamentally these are all questions of trust. Power-brokering is trust-brokering, a proposition that is undergoing a sea change for technological reasons in the 21st century.

“Blockchain can bring trust back to standards creation.”

Today the International Standards Organization (ISO) requires those bodies it endorses as developers of standards to develop their standards in a transparent and fair manner that ensures open consensus building. But one wonders how it assures that this occurs? One may note that organizations pay money to ISO to be endorsed by ISO as accredited developers of standards. Emerging technologies like blockchain can improve trust in standards creation. Blockchain could introduce full attribution not only of individual sources but of individual votes by individual persons to include specific content in a standard (both for and against), which could transform how an entity like ISO could accredit standards development. It could fundamentally change the nature of standards like PMI's "A Guide to the Project Body of Knowledge" (which is updated every few years by a cast of hundreds if not thousands of volunteers). It could also change how standards are published, extending to the decentralization of copyrighting.

Creators of project management standards extol their works as gospel, perhaps even certifying individuals for knowledge of the standard, but never demonstrate the extent to which the standard has been adopted in practice. For example, PMI publishes "A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge" (PMBOK Guide), and individuals take a knowledge test to earn a "PMP" certification, but 9 out of 10 users will continue to mistake the PMBOK Guide's Process Groups of Initiating, Planning, Executing, Controlling, and Closing for project phases. They are not project phases, and despite being certified in this knowledge that strikes at the very heart of what PMI's premiere standard is, users consistently implement it wrong in organizations. Is it a standard if nobody does it right? Blockchain can be used to shine a light on this pathology and correct it. Certified assessments of the adoption or application of a standard by an organization could be viewed as transactions that are reconciled to the original standard itself. Specific records of adoption of a practice (or failure to adopt a practice, as the case may be in any given third party assessment) could be embedded in the published standard dynamically, demonstrating whether the standard (or any part of it) is indeed a de facto standard. With data on usage embedded into the standard, we could see which parts of the standard are used most, i.e. Pareto. We could see which kinds of organizations and users use different parts of the standard, i.e. consumer segmentation. We could compare usage (or lack thereof) to performance problems, i.e. effect stratification. And we could update these and many other dimensions dynamically, refreshing the standard with value-added information in keeping with the real world. Importantly we could cause this updating to occur without the intervention, filtering, or meddling of powerful knowledge-brokers who should recuse themselves.

To the larger point, with emerging technologies we may be able to solve the problem that the OLC encountered in Virginia Beach nearly 20 years ago and which every effort to establish a standard since then has faced. That is, we can distinguish discrete knowledge from shared knowledge; demonstrate the extent to which any knowledge is shared; provide views of knowledge standards that are most relevant to different parties; update knowledge-based standards automatically with usage data - avoiding Orwellian dystopias like China's social credit system by applying Phronesis methodically; and in doing so, we can bypass centralized authorities or gatekeepers (whose own views of the situation are perforce limited and biased). Through technologies like blockchain, we can add new knowledge like links added to a chain, improving knowledge for all of us with each link in an ever-growing circle of trust. Knowledge in the respective minds of practitioners that may have been buried in backroom battles can be resurrected, and the playing field can be levelled. The highly political and esoteric standards-

making machinations of the few can be traded for truly transparent and decentralized knowledge creation by the many. And we don't need to be NASA's rocket scientists to realize that these things would improve the universe of project management for all of us.

About the Author



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John Schlichter coined the term "Organizational Project Management" or "OPM," which is the system for implementing the business strategy of an organization through projects. OPM became a global standard and is how companies throughout the world deliver projects valued in billions if not trillions of dollars. "John has contributed greatly to PMI," Greg Balestrero, CEO, PMI Today, 2002. "In John's role as the leader of PMI's OPM3 program, he has immeasurably contributed to the growth of the profession," Becky Winston, J.D., Chair of the Board of Directors, PMI Today, 2002. Having created OPM3© (an international standard in project, program, and portfolio management), John founded OPM Experts LLC, a firm delivering OPM solutions and a leading provider of maturity assessment services. Industry classifications: NAICS 541618 Other Management Consulting and NAICS 611430 Training. John is a member of the adjunct faculty of Emory University's Goizueta Business School.

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