

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Connecting for corporate social innovation²

*By Prof Darren Dalcher
Director, National Centre for Project Management
United Kingdom*

According to the Oxford Dictionary to connect is '*to bring together or into contact so that a real or notional link is established*', or '*to associate or relate something in some respect*'. The derivation appears to be from Late Middle English in the sense of being united physically. The dictionary further adds that the etymological root is from the Latin connectere, in the form of con – which implies 'together', and nectere, to 'bind'. The Cambridge English Dictionary simply explains to connect as '*to join or be joined with something else*', while the Merriam Webster Dictionary offers the brief definition '*to join (two or more things) together*'

Connecting can thus be defined as joining, linking or being joined. Over time the use of the term appears to have expanded from a physical sense of binding together to a more logical set of connections that are being made between objects, things and people. The Oxford English Dictionary thus defines a connection as a '*relationship in which a person or thing is linked or associated with something else*', while the Cambridge Dictionary relates to '*the state of being related to someone or something else*'. The Oxford Dictionary also provides a somewhat more contemporary definition of connections, as '*people with whom one has social or professional contact or to whom one is related, especially those with influence and able to offer one help*'.

The transformation of *connecting* from a physical-material point of view towards a more social sphere appears to be in train. In the age of social media, connecting can enable new forms of arranging, organising, and engaging for novel types of action and improvement. Ultimately, connecting can enable radical and beneficial transformation that empowers change subjects to engage, influence and shape whilst ensuring that communities buy into, co-create and make use of the budding change.

Projects for the community – The Eden Project

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see [project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers](#), [click here](#). Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

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The Eden Project, located near St. Austell on a site of a former china clay mine is an extremely popular visitor attraction in Cornwall, England. The £141m project to reclaim and regenerate a neglected brownfield site, in Cornwall, which has the UK's highest proportion of derelict mines, was the brainchild of Sir Tim Smit. Sir Tim previously restored the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall, neglected since the Second World War, which gave him the inspiration to create the regenerative concept of the Eden Project (Petherick, et al., 2004; Smit, 1999; 2016).

The Eden Project is a dramatic global garden housed in tropical biomes that nestle in a crater the size of 30 football pitches. The two enormous biomes consist of hundreds of hexagonal and pentagonal, inflated plastic cells, supported by a steel framework. The site, which was opened in March 2001, has welcomed its 20th millionth visitor in 2018. The Eden Project, often marketed as the eighth wonder of the world, affords a gateway to the relationship between people and plants, offering a fascinating insight into the story of mankind's connection to and dependence on plant life (Eden, 2016).

The Eden Project is a new kind of visitor garden. The rainforest biome, the world's largest greenhouse and indoor rainforest at 3.9 acres, enables visitors to experience the sights, smells and scale of the rainforests and to discover the tropical plants that are used to produce everyday products from fruiting banana, coffee and rubber plants to giant bamboo. The Mediterranean biome offers the chance to explore more temperate and arid climates, including lemon trees, olive groves and gnarled vines, while the 30-acre outdoor botanical garden offers the opportunity to see tea, lavender, hops, hemp, sunflower and other plants that will change our future, flourishing under the Cornish sun.

The Eden Project recognises, and shares, the importance of sustainability to local communities and takes into account the economic, environmental and social benefits to be considered when making decisions. It has improved the image of the local area and rapidly transformed a derelict former mine into one of the UK's top tourist destinations, averaging well over a million visitors per year and contributing in excess of £2 billion to the Cornish economy. It employs over 700 local people, the majority of whom were previously unemployed, and uses over 2,500 local farmers and suppliers. Indeed, all food and drink is locally sourced from Cornwall and the South West. The project has transformed the local economy, decreased unemployment by 6 per cent and introduced a growing demand for holidays and accommodation, whilst also boosting attendance at the other local and regional attractions and resorts.

The Eden Project is fast emerging as a unique resource for education, knowledge and innovation towards a sustainable future. The latest addition to the site is the Core, a sustainable education centre built to educate future generations as well as businesses and entrepreneurs about the benefits of sustainable development.

The core has been built as an education facility incorporating classrooms and exhibition spaces designed to convey the central message about the relationship between people and plants. The building has taken its inspiration from plants, capped by the soaring timber roof, which gives the building its distinctive shape. Schools and other groups can

utilise the facility for extended periods and are also welcome to make use of the local youth hostel which was specially made out of repurposed shipping containers.

The Core is also a home to art exhibitions and special projects and installations, which support the educational mission of the facility. The Eden Project offers environmental education focusing on the interdependence of plants and people. It is also concerned with generating a better understanding of how humans can 'manage' behaviours and ecosystems to live more sustainably, thereby complementing the physical facility with long term education and improved understanding and skills related to responsible and sustainable practices.

The Eden Project – Global impact and vision

Revolutions come in different shapes and sizes... The success of the Eden project has encouraged wider aspirations and further initiatives. In order to continue to raise environmental consciousness across the globe, the newly established Eden Project International Foundation will sprout spinoff centres in an English motorway service station, a Tasmanian warehouse, a Chinese docklands and amongst the giant sequoia trees of the Sierra Nevada mountains of the US (Kennedy, 2017). The grand vision is for a collection of oases of change that will engender a fever of excitement and wonder about our interconnection to the natural world.

The intention is not to create a string of theme parks, but instead to offer the space for observation, reflection and thinking. The projects can thus tackle different domains and challenges. For example, a future project on the river Foyle in Derry, the second largest city in Northern Ireland, is intended to link three old walled gardens – one catholic, one protestant and one state-owned. The centres aim to continue to challenge thinking on sustainability, and the one planned for the motorway services at Junction 27 of the M5 motorway, will be linked to the railway station of Tiverton Parkway, Devon with visitors arriving by fast train and hiring electric cars to explore the surrounding countryside. According to Sir Tim the intention is to create 'the best motorway service station in the world' (ibid.).

But the most immediate plans are for establishing a new centre in China. Construction will begin in 2018 on Eden Qingdao, the port city on the east coast of China. The new facility will cost £150m and focus on the theme of water and its importance for life. It is due to open to the public in 2020 and to feature the world's highest indoor waterfall, matching the height of the Niagara Falls (Morris, 2018). The site secured for the project is a large area of reclaimed and damaged land originally used for salt production at the confluence of two rivers and will feature a large biome and a series of streams and lakes. It is hoped that the site will encourage environmental and sustainability consideration and a reflection on the role of water and its relationship with human society.

Future plans for additional centres in China include: a new facility in the city of Yan'an—the place where Mao Zedong's Long March came to an end—to transform a blighted valley just outside the city into a showcase for agriculture, craft and education; the

conversion of a former limestone mine near Tianjin into an environmental centre; and, a further development for the Sheng Lu vineyard in Beijing, to fight the persistent opaque local fog pollution (Kennedy, 2017) and provide an oasis for citizens wishing to reconnect with nature (Morris, 2018).

Creative community engagement – The Eden Project

Engagement extends beyond space and physical facilities. The transformation of the scarred landscape in Cornwall and the creation of the Eden Project biomes were only the early part of the activities emerging from the mission to engage with the public around the area of sustainability. Success beyond the actual delivery of the assets requires continued attention to usage and the value that is being delivered. Attracting over 20 million visitors in the first seventeen years of operation implies success not just in the delivery but also in establishing and embedding the new facilities and in attracting significant usage patterns. However, the Eden Project mission to engage goes deeper than visitor numbers. Environmental education provides additional business and engagement activities, however the educational facilities and new relationships forged from the use of the facility generate novel opportunities for engagement and development.

The Eden Project is developing new ways for engaging with visitors, as well as with the wider community, by taking some of what has worked in their facility into new neighbourhoods and areas. The use of art, music, storytelling, humour and hands on activities has proved effective in engaging both individual visitors, and complete communities and plays a key part in involving people in influencing the future of where they live. Many of the ideas and approaches developed by the Eden Project have been applied in planning events for local improvement in Cornwall and beyond, and in other developmental initiatives.

The range of activities is re-shaping the possibilities for engagement with communities, encompassing, for example:

- Drop-in community planning days, designed like local fêtes
- Film-making workshops with local stakeholders
- Learning journeys to other communities
- Practical training on everything from gardening to business skills

The philosophy that underpins the events extends beyond the normal focus on the products and artefacts of consultation and engagement, placing a greater focus on the processes that lead to engagement. Indeed, a process view has the potential to enable a longer-term engagement with participants, stakeholder groups and communities and support the building of long-term relationships and meaningful alliances.

The benefits of the ambition to value the process of engagement over specific artefacts and products include the ability to:

- **Establish a real sense of participation:** by giving people tangible ways to input to the day, such as setting up ‘washing lines’ or ‘rant pinboards’ where they can add their comments.
- **Encourage new people to get involved;** by reaching out to as many age groups as possible by providing a convivial setting (often with tea, cake and bunting!) in a venue that’s easily accessible.
- **Inspire new thinking;** by creating an inspirational space and offering practical activities – such as contributing to ideas scrapbooks – and trying to raise people's aspirations of what may be possible.
- **Catalyse partnerships:** by convening different people, from residents to service providers to community groups, in a neutral space where they can find common ground.

The discussions and engagement resulting from the creative approaches to engage and involve potential partners and participants enable communities to kick start meaningful conversations about where people live and work and get involved in neighbourhood planning and environmental improvement initiatives. More crucially, they play a part in enabling people to reflect upon, communicate about, and even begin to co-shape, their future.

There are many examples of initiatives where the use of Eden expertise, had enabled participants to transform traditional planning models. One example is the case of seven local Cornish towns, which have worked with an established theatre company to develop new ways to engage with a wider community about future improvements. The idea of *Imaginary Journeys* enabled the seven locations to: provide access to the arts across Cornwall, and build and communicate with new audiences and support town-centre regeneration. Under the scheme, 24 local artists used town-centre premises ranging from empty shops to community centres to apply and develop the metaphor of a travel agency to encourage interaction with non-traditional arts audiences. As the project was drawn from the community, each of the localities developed its own sense of ownership and perspective, which were reflected in their particular installation. The value of the activities was in exploring the pride of place in the local community, valuing memory and the past, facilitating the imaginative expression of dreams, hopes and aspirations and imagining potential futures.

Other initiatives utilised creative techniques to: design nature-based play space for local families in Ayr, build a recreation ground in Kingsbridge, devise better outdoor play access on the Lizard Peninsula and the Isle of Scilly, strengthen community links in the West Midlands, Use outdoor activities to connect older people in care homes with their local community, or make use of empty space in the East End of London. The success of the engagement activities was in being able to offer new perspectives, ideas and inspiration for new endeavours and in instilling future-focused and community-aware methods for thinking about, planning for, co-creating and engaging with a better future.

Connect to lead

Other businesses continue to grapple with their role in public engagement. Lord John Browne of Madingley, Former Chief Executive of BP and President of the Royal Academy of Engineering, observes a significantly altered business landscape. Reflecting on the big rift between big business and the rest of society he identifies a critical and urgent need for business to connect with society in order to avoid the mistakes of the past (Browne et al., 2016; p. x). Lord Browne recognises an enormous potential prize for the companies, which choose to meet the new demands for unremitting transparency with respect, authenticity and openness so that they can reflect society's needs as part of their changing business model. The new imperative is for companies to directly connect with society.

The business environment is increasingly becoming more demanding. Mirvis and Googins (2017) assert that Businesses face three interlocking challenges:

- Shareholder demands for growth
- Employee desire for meaning from work, and
- Rising public expectations to address social, economic, and environmental concerns.

'A renewed connection with the external world is only possible if business people are willing to adopt an entirely new attitude. They need ... to engage radically. This means being brave enough to embrace genuine openness, far sighted enough to make friends before they need them and to communicate in a language that exudes authenticity rather than propaganda' (Browne, 2016, p. xv).

Browne puts forward a simple agenda in the form of four fundamental tenets needed to underpin the new relationship and connect with the external world. The framework is based on the collective wisdom and reflection of a group of senior leaders engaged during a two-year research effort. Framed as *connected leadership*, it calls for the integration of societal and environmental considerations into core-business decision making at every level of the company. Connected leadership is predicated on engaging effectively and sustainably with the external world through four basic tenets (Browne, 2016; p. 14):

- Map your world
- Define your contribution
- Apply world-class management
- Engage radically

Browne agitates for the development of a constructive alliance between business and society. While the specific issues may change and the cultural values of participants may evolve, the fundamental importance of a constructive alliance will remain critically essential to address the needs of both parties. He notes that succeeding at applying the four tenets requires a profoundly different point of view and the courage to question the status quo.

'I am acutely aware that when I succeeded in business it was so often because I engaged effectively and sustainably with the external world. When I failed it was usually because I got this wrong. My ambition is to change the way people think about business. Business is the most powerful tool we possess in our quest for progress and prosperity. In my view we need to take more care of it, whether we are executives inside companies, citizens observing from outside or government leaders tasked with oversight.' (Ibid.; p. 15)

New forms of creative engagement are possible as has been proven by the Eden Project and other progressive organisations trying to bridge the gap and engage stakeholders and the wider community in radical new ways.

The new business imperative: People rising

Connected leadership offers the potential to connect and shape in meaningful new ways. However, Lord Browne identifies three major forthcoming shifts that will accelerate the imperative to connect business with society. The shifts, which are likely to fundamentally alter the relationship between business and society and will therefore need to be addressed proactively, are (ibid.; p. 215):

i. The rise of disruptive technologies in general and of AI in particular: While AI promises radical solutions, it places extraordinary power in corporate hands and could trigger a new level of distrust in organisations.

ii. The shift in the economic centre of gravity towards emerging economies: The main theatre of action for interaction between big business and society will be in the emerging new world replete with attitudes and cultures which are altogether different from those of the West.

iii. The emergence of a new global generation that will demand more than ever from business: The demand is likely to be fuelled by increasing wealth, education and access to information, as well as shrinking government budgets. The growth of emerging markets will further add to the pool of potential commentators, critics, stakeholders and interested participants.

'These three trends will change the nature of the business-society relationship, creating a moving target that even the most enlightened companies will have to chase with a commitment to renewal and learning. Above all, the trends will amplify the relevance of this relationship to the successful future of both sides' (ibid.; p. 215).

There appears to be one additional factor that merits consideration: The growing impact, availability, accessibility and power of **technology** appears to add a further complicating factor that can underpin, support and give a voice to wider communities. Technology can also play a part in exposing, and then sharing widely practices that are not compatible with the wishes of the community, the values that it holds or the expectations that it may harbour. Moreover, technology can provide a platform through social media for campaigning, commenting, influencing and participating that can drive

the agenda and empower society, or even small players and specific interest groups within it, to object to or battle companies in new and far more public ways.

Nonetheless, technology can ultimately provide the best response and the means for effective and engaged campaigns to address concerns and mismatches. In this way technology can deliver the infrastructure, provide the means to engage and also determine the future for the interactions, relationship and connections between business and the community. In other words, technology certainly appears to have the potential to shape the relationship of business to its various stakeholders.

Technology: Placing people at the core

What are the implications of the newfound emphasis on technology?

Given that we find ourselves in a post information age, with technology enabling organisations to report, chart, analyse, and potentially and controversially even influence and determine, does technology have a mediating role in our relationship with society? Given its aggregating capacity and overseeing perspective, does it rule out or diminish the influence of people?

Ultimately, with the rising importance of technology, is the age of the individual over?

The guest article by Dale Roberts endeavours to respond to the challenge and address the impact and role of technology. The article is based on Dale Roberts's and Rooven Pakkiri's book *Decision Sourcing: Decision Making for the Social Agile Enterprise*, published by Routledge. Roberts recognises the liberating impact of the digital economy, yet, rather than focus on the products, structures and processes, he places the focus on the way business organises, communicates and behaves.

Technology enables unprecedented levels of interaction and connection but has been used to cement and institutionalise structures and procedures arresting the potential for significant development. The widely popular process-centric perspective on management begets individual transactions; Roberts laments the transactional nature of business relationships with customers, pointing instead to technology as an enabler and facilitator. Indeed, ignoring the connection potential of social technologies imperils organisations that are not attuned to their consumers. Social tools offer businesses the possibility to become more human and Roberts makes a case for wider interaction within systems as a preferred mode of explaining and planning for connections.

Agile aficionados may recognise the manifesto call for people over process, but the narrative adopts a historical orientation to consider the shifting balance between the process and people within the business. Through his discussion, Roberts raises some thought provoking issues related to connections, relationships and how we position things, such as how consumers and customers may feel about being included in some company's selling cycle, instead of driving their own initiated buying endeavour that they may wish to shape and direct.

The key contribution of Roberts' thesis is in drawing attention to how decisions are made within organisations. Transactions support hierarchical structures and formal decisions by the highest established authority. Yet, the emergence of social technology enables a richer diversity of views, opinions and participants; it also encourages the concerned parties to become involved. In other words, social technologies provide the glue needed to connect the business with its internal participants, external stakeholders and other relevant parties. While his work offers insights regarding social listening, engaged decisions and the relationship between different technologies and the level of interaction, it brings home the need to consider how decisions can be sourced and improved.

Participation comes at different levels and Roberts is therefore able to identify the diverse roles of contributors. Broader participation as advocated through his writing enables better-informed and more creative forms of inclusive decision making as befits a changing social and business context. Social technology supports broad and more representative participation in decision making. Social technology can thus be utilised to facilitate wider inclusion and improve decisions that can be sourced through collaboration with wider communities of interested individuals, and groups. It also offers the potential to engage the workforce, customers, and other interest groups and begin to envisage new ways of making better-informed and more comprehensive decisions whilst trying to create a better future. Crucially, therefore technology puts people back in the driving seat, ready and able to participate, shape, influence, drive and deliver. Rather than signal the end of individual participation, social media and technology is thus able to position people at the very core of beneficial and relevant change efforts.

Connecting with people and communities

Social tools challenge organisations and hierarchies. As Roberts has demonstrated they return the focus back to people. While they enable potential opportunities for growth and agility through new forms of informed, aligned and inclusive decision making, they play a key part in emphasising the community and the need to connect and engage more widely. They also encourage consideration and inclusion of the workforce, different participants, and diverse communities who may have an interest in the decisions. Wider inclusion of interested communities can also offer more creative and more sustainable solutions that address real needs and issues.

Social entrepreneurs have long tried to address the needs of communities through appealing to individuals. Their approaches emphasise and empower individuals as the key players in understanding their own condition and acting to improve upon it through small scale engagements, short experiments and positive experiences that can be built upon and scaled up to involve increasingly larger constituencies and interest groups.

'Social connection is such a basic feature of human experience that when we are deprived of it, we suffer.'

– Leonard Mlodinow

Connecting is an essential part of human existence and a crucial part of our ability to organise into groups and networks. Connecting seems to encompass two main components encapsulating the material and the emotional. The material level may entail physical or increasingly likely digital connections and links, which may have social, tribal or organisational implications; while the emotional builds on relationships, needs and expectations. US Physician Dean Ornish observed that *'the need for connection and community is primal, as fundamental as the need for air, water, and food'*. Others including US author David Shields note that being part and counting is essential as *'we hunger for connection to a larger community'*.

The topic of community is closely related to the need to connect and appears to be tightly woven into the ways we organise and socialise. Nonetheless, to impact communities, we need to develop ways of connecting and engaging.

'Where there is no human connection, there is no compassion. Without compassion, then community, commitment, loving-kindness, human understanding, and peace all shrivel. Individuals become isolated, the isolated turn cruel, and the tragic hovers in the forms of domestic and civil violence. Art and literature are antidotes to that.'

– Susan Vreeland

NGOs and organisations such as the Eden project have shown how the power of art and literature can be utilised in connecting, engaging and encouraging wider participation and overcoming some of the fundamental challenges highlighted by Lord Browne. The power to influence and connect through the emphasis of human emotions and needs has long been noted. Angela Ahrendts, American businesswoman and Senior Vice-President for Retail at Apple observed that *'at their core, an influencer creates an empowering human connection'*.

Connecting appears to have a fundamental role in achieving and influencing. Canadian writer and motivational speaker Robin S. Sharma maintains that *'the business of business is relationships; the business of life is human connection.'* Dr Marshall Goldsmith, a leading researcher and executive coach suggests that the project managers and shapers of the future will be more facilitators than experts. Project Eden has proved that effective advocacy can engage, facilitate, influence and help to change hearts and minds.

What then are the parameters for responsible, engaged and connected facilitation?

Drawing partially on the Gettysburg Address by President Abraham Lincoln, we may define connecting as the responsible leadership, facilitation and stewardship informed by the need to act for the people, with the people and by the people.

Acting for the people may prove to be the only way to continue to maintain the trust and respect between business and society as indicated by Lord Browne and his approach to connected leadership as we map, define, apply and radically engage with respect and authenticity.

Acting with the people requires the engagement and creativity achieved by Project Eden in getting people to explore, question, participate, encourage, inspire and catalyse partnerships.

Acting by the people remains a massive challenge that entails getting individuals and communities to co-create and drive their own change initiatives often invoking the principles of social innovation and social entrepreneurship that have been used to transform lives and communities one step at a time.

Getting people involved can be facilitated through social media and technology. In reality it often requires individuals and communities to engage through a series of activities that embed commitment, deliver marginal improvement and thereby continue to point to future possibilities and further improvement. The momentum, and funding, for such initiatives may need to come from business and other national or regional initiatives concerned with improvement, development and social innovation.

Connecting for social innovation

Connecting is instrumental to developing new ways forward. German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe reflects that *'in nature we never see anything isolated, but everything in connection with something else which is before it, beside it, under it and over it'*.

Lord Browne observes an ongoing failure of many business leaders to learn from the past as well as a failure of the systems established by organisations to ensure they remain connected and relevant.

'Corporate Social Responsibility, 'CSR', has failed in its role as the system for handling external relationships because it is so disconnected from commercial activity and from the needs of real people. I believe CSR is dead. The connection between business and the world can only thrive if companies integrate social and environmental issues deeply into their core business strategy and operations. Critically, as traditional sources of competitive advantage are eroded, connection with society represents a final frontier of competitiveness: An opportunity to build lasting distinctiveness (Browne et al.; xiii-xiv).

Reflecting upon the failure of CSR, Lord Browne draws four main criticisms of CSR (pp. 136-7):

1. CSR ambitions are rarely realised because they lack the active participation from big spending organisational functions such as production and marketing
2. Centralised CSR ignores local managers and takes too narrow a view of the relevant external stakeholders
3. CSR is overly focused on limiting the downside
4. CSR programmes tend to be limited and short-lived

Lord Browne's solution is to apply the tenets of connected leadership (pp. 143-4) as an alternative approach that requires organisations to:

- Understand the trends that are shaping their context;
- Quantify the value at stake (and to discover what stakeholders want and need);
- Professionally manage the connection between business and society, and;
- Engage radically so as to earn trust and credibility and build lasting relationships

Lord Browne concludes that connected leadership can do significantly more than generate mutual advantage for society and the private sector: In his view connection with society offers the new frontier of competitive advantage, providing a means of success for those who learn to address it (p. 145).

Mirvis and Googins (2017, p. 1) suggest that addressing the challenges faced by business requires turning to Corporate Social Innovation. They observe effective organisations that are able to invest in new innovation sources and methods, including partnerships with social entrepreneurs and internal employee ‘intrapreneurs’. Such organisations are able to generate new products, unlock markets, and engage in creative philanthropy, thereby addressing key social challenges while supporting business reputation and growth.

Much in common with the Eden project, Corporate Social Innovation recognises that social issues provide enormous opportunity to refocus, collaborate with multiple parties, gain from the diversity of views, connect with different parties and engage new communities. Addressing societal problems in meaningful ways requires multi-party collaboration bringing in a diversity of skills, attitudes, capabilities and perspectives. Most importantly, meeting social challenges requires new and innovative ways of doing things. The Eden Project has developed a range of innovative approaches for engaging, communicating and proposing new ideas. Connecting underpins the ability to develop sustained relationships. Refreshing the modes of engagement and developing new and more engaging ways for connecting, innovating, co-creating and existing side by side could become part of a new balance between business and society. Connecting and continuing to connect may ultimately hold the key to developing a prosperous, lasting and sustained co-existence.

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About the Author



Darren Dalcher, PhD

Author, Professor, Series Editor
Director, National Centre for Project Management
United Kingdom



Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI SMIEEE SFHEA is Professor of Project Management, 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 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 200 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Software: Evolution and Process*, a leading international software engineering journal. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Routledge and of the 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.

Darren 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, A Senior Member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) and the British Academy of Management. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He sits on numerous senior research and professional boards, including The PMI Academic Member Advisory Group, the APM Research Advisory Group, the CMI Academic Council and the APM Group Ethics and Standards Governance Board. He is the Academic Advisor and Consulting Editor for the next APM Body of Knowledge. Prof Dalcher is an academic advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at darren.dalcher@warwick.ac.uk.