

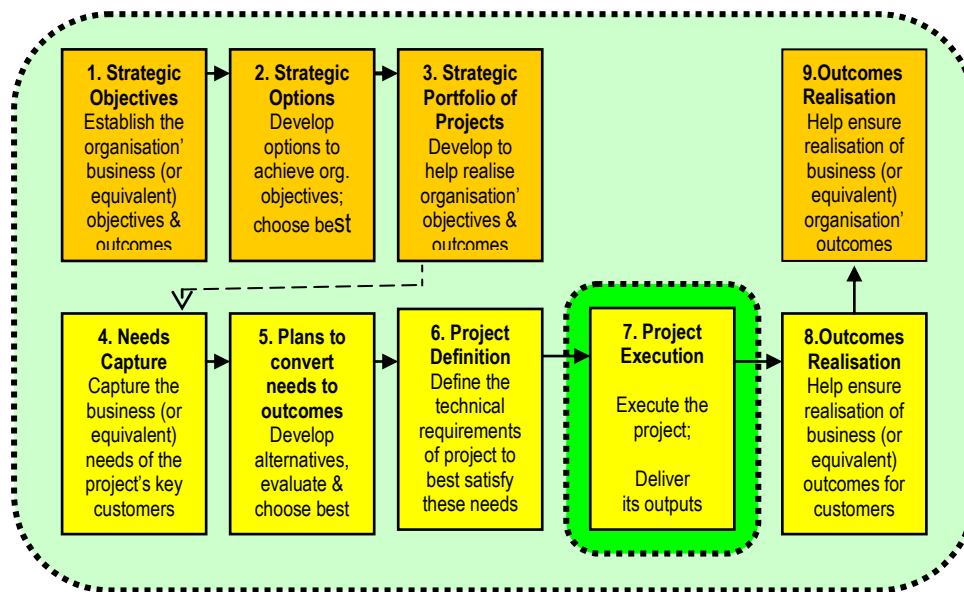
## Some consequences of having two co-existing paradigms of project management of project management

By Alan Stretton

### BACKGROUND

I recently completed a series of four articles in this journal under the broad heading of “Series on project management’s contributions to achieving broader ends” (Stretton 2016b,c,d,e).

The main theme of this series was advocating that project management look beyond the project as an end in itself (with its traditional “execution-only” focus on project outputs), towards broader contributions and value-adding in both post-execution and pre-execution phases. The findings of this series are summarised in the following figure.



**Figure 1: Potential (and sometimes actual) areas for extended project management contributions in pre-execution and post-execution phases of a broader project life cycle**

The execution-only perspective is illustrated by the box surrounding text box 7. Project Execution. This represents what I will call the “traditional” paradigm of project management.

The broader representation includes not only involvement in pre-execution and post-execution activities for individual projects, but also involvement in organisational strategic planning. Any and all combinations of these, added to Project Execution, will be described as representing an “emergent” paradigm of project management.

## **TWO CO-EXISTING PARADIGMS OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

The current situation in project management is that both the traditional and emergent paradigms are widely represented in the literature, and in practice.

The co-existence of these two paradigms is recognised by many in project management, but evidently not by all. Some consequences of this co-existence have also been recognised, but many have not been discussed in detail. This article is concerned with exploring a few such consequential problems and opportunities. These include:

- Some adverse effects which the traditional paradigm has on the emergent paradigm in relation to awareness and promotion of the latter;
- A “blame the project manager” dilemma which suggests a defensive strategy of increasing project management involvement in project initiation activities;
- An opportunity to take over the often ungoverned spaces of project initiation before a less qualified avocation does so (plus adding value in the process);
- A discipline-or-profession-related consequence for project management

But first we look a little more closely at the nature of each of these two paradigms.

### **The traditional paradigm**

In a recent article in this journal, Dalcher 2016 had the following to say about the traditional definition of a project, and how project management is perceived under the traditional paradigm.

The traditional definition of a project implies a temporal arrangement concerned with actualising a planned and defined objective. Indeed, project management is regarded as an execution discipline concerned with realising plans.

In other words, the traditional paradigm essentially involves what many have called an execution-only perception of the scope of project management. This traditional paradigm is still very much alive and well in the project management literature, and in practice. In the literature, it is perhaps most notably represented by PMI’s PMBOK Guide (PMI 2013), which we will be discussing again shortly.

### **The emergent paradigm**

Other project management people have a broader paradigm for the discipline. Peter Morris has been describing this for over two decades as ‘the management of projects’ (e.g. Morris 1994) which he summarises (in Morris 2013:281) as

...one where the project organisation is the unit of analysis, where context, the front end, technology, people and the commercial basis of the project’s development and delivery are included, as well as the traditional control topics.

As is evident from many previous articles I have published in this journal, I am well and truly a follower of this emergent paradigm. This is largely because this paradigm encompasses what we actually did in the project-based organisations in which I worked for some forty years (before venturing into academe) – particularly in Civil & Civic, where we were normally heavily involved in pre-project-execution activities, and often in post-delivery activities as well.

### **Consequences arise from the co-existence of these two paradigms**

Many writers who evidently embrace the emergent paradigm acknowledge this co-existence, and have discussed it in some detail (e.g. Morris 1994, 2013). However, it would appear that many followers of the traditional paradigm do not acknowledge the existence of the emergent paradigm, in spite of its having been in place for over half a century.

In this situation it is tempting to ask the question, “Do advocates of the traditional paradigm consider that we in Civil & Civic were not doing project management work when we were involved in pre-execution or post-execution phases of projects?”

Whatever the answer to this question, such lack of acknowledgement has adverse implications for the emergent paradigm, as now discussed.

### **HOW THE TRADITIONAL PARADIGM CAN ADVERSLY AFFECT THE EMERGENT PARADIGM**

#### **The traditional paradigm is widely followed**

As already noted, the traditional paradigm is alive and well. I have seen no data about the relative usages of traditional verses emergent approaches to project management, but anecdotal evidence from active project management colleagues suggests that the traditional approach is still widely practiced.

This appears to be reflected in the very widespread use of PMI’s PMBOK Guide, which essentially follows an execution-only approach. As Morris et al 2006 observe,

The *PMBOK Guide* reflects a strong execution orientation, having hardly any material on strategy and project definition, ....

(This also appears to reflect a continuation of traditional concerns with promoting the specialisation of project management as a distinct and separate avocation. This contrasts with the emergent paradigm, which involves increased involvement by project management in pre-execution and post-execution activities. This, in turn, implies that project management becomes increasingly integrated with general management, as discussed in more detail in Stretton & Blythman 2012).

The very widespread adoption of the traditional paradigm, and an apparent lack of readiness to acknowledge the existence of the emergent paradigm, can adversely affect the latter in a couple of key ways.

## **The prominence of the traditional paradigm appears to contribute to a lack of awareness by general management of the existence of an emergent paradigm**

One consequence of the above is that many general management people can have little, if any, reason to believe that project management has anything to contribute beyond project execution and delivery, if they have not been made aware that there is also an emergent project management paradigm.

Further, many such general managers may be aware of the widespread use of the PMBOK Guide by project managers. However, as Morris et al 2006 have said,

...if project management is defined using the PMBOK Guide paradigm then it is not particularly surprising that senior managers are reported as thinking that project managers should not be involved in strategic issues or project definition, or procurement, as research by Crawford for example recently reported.

Such lack of awareness by general management has somewhat different types of consequences and potential solutions in different contexts.

### **Consequences of lack of awareness for production-based organisations undertaking projects**

Over the longer term, there would appear to be better chances of improving senior management awareness of the potential benefits of the emergent paradigm approach in production-based organisations undertaking projects than with external customers for example (to be addressed below). Of course this first needs advocacy from project managers who embrace the emergent paradigm. From that point a progressive demonstration of benefits from project management involvement could be undertaken along the lines outlined in Stretton 2015 c, d, e in this journal.

### **Consequences of lack of awareness for project-based organisations providing project management services to external customers**

Exposure to only the traditional paradigm gives potential customers the impression that project management is only concerned with the narrow task of project delivery (and making a profit whilst doing so).

In these circumstances there are no grounds for customers' senior managers to be aware that there is an emergent project management paradigm which has the potential to help them in pre- and post-execution activities, and thence in satisfying their broader business (or equivalent) needs.

***A key consequence of a primary focus on the traditional paradigm is that it significantly disadvantages providers of emergent project management services from successfully promoting their services.***

***It also has the effect of disadvantaging customers, because consequent opportunities for adding value for customers cannot eventuate if the traditional paradigm continues to dominate.***

## THE “BLAME THE PROJECT MANAGER” DILEMMA

### Decisions made in project initiation stages are crucially important

It is widely acknowledged that the “front end” of project initiation is crucially important. As Morris 2013:283 has observed,

The front end is the most important part of the project offering the greatest opportunities to add, or destroy, value.

As far as opportunities to add value are concerned, we are concerned with what constitutes value to the customer. The customer is concerned with broader business (or equivalent) outcomes, and the challenge at project initiation stages is to maximise the extent to which the project(s) will contribute to realisation of these outcomes. I have discussed these processes many times, most recently in Stretton 2016c in this journal.

On the negative side, many things can happen which tend to destroy value. These include:

- the customer’s business needs are not properly captured;
- plans to convert these needs to business outcomes are not adequately developed;
- the “right” project (i.e. the project which makes the maximum contribution towards helping achieve these outcomes) does not emerge from these conversion plans;
- the project requirements are not properly developed, and/or the project is not defined in a way which maximally facilitates its execution.

This is quite a substantial list, even though it is not a comprehensive one. Now we come to the first problem with project initiation under the traditional paradigm

### **Under the traditional paradigm, crucial “front end” decisions are made by non-project people**

Dalcher 2014 describes a relatively common situation regarding front-end decisions – here in the context of requirements management, as follows.

...requirements management .....is an often ignored aspect of project elaboration.....  
Project managers often inherit an agreed statement of requirements which can become a confining constraint around the project.

This leads us to a broad question put by Morris 2013:88, as follows (his italics)

*Should project management be responsible for ensuring that requirements are adequately defined? This is one of the defining issues of the project management discipline.*

Later in his book, Morris answers his own question as follows (pp. 167-8)

For years, there have been arguments about how involved project managers need to be in managing the technical development of a project. .... Yet there is plenty of evidence that technical issues cause projects and programs to fail. ....

The answer surely is that project and program managers need to ensure the right processes and practices are being followed with respect to technical definition and development so that obvious errors are avoided.

There appears to me to be an unanswerable case for project management to undertake this type of checking, at the very least. However, I believe there is a very strong case for project managers to go well beyond merely ensuring that others have followed the right processes and practices. I believe they should actively manage all project initiation processes, for the following reasons.

### **Some 40% of all project failures are caused by inadequacies in project initiation processes**

In a previous article in this journal (Stretton 2015a), I noted that some 40% of all project failures are caused by inadequacies in project initiation processes. Admittedly there is a dearth of reliable data on causes of project failures, but even if it is not all that accurate, a figure that approaches this magnitude is a major concern.

### **Project management tends to be blamed even when it has not been involved in “front end” decision making**

Now, a potential, and all-too-often actual, negative consequence for project management is that it tends to get blamed for such failures, in spite of not having been involved in the “front-end” decision-making. (If you look at it another way, as I tend to do, you could say that, in these circumstances, project management is not in charge of its own destiny).

### **This “blame the project manager” dilemma suggests the defensive strategy of increasing project management involvement in project initiation activities**

So, if for no other reason than self-preservation, and some semblance of control over its own destiny, the least that project management can do is to ensure that the initiation processes have been properly undertaken. That is one type of defensive strategy.

A more expeditious strategy is for project management to become more directly involved in the management of all project initiation activities.

This happens automatically in project-based organisations. It is evidently more difficult to achieve in production-based organisations, but I have suggested ways for project managers to become progressively more directly involved in project initiation activities in Stretton 2015c, d, e in this journal.

However, beyond defensive strategies, there are opportunity-focused reasons for strongly promoting increased “front end” involvement by project managers.

## **APPARENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT RELATED TO PROJECT INITIATION ACTIVITIES**

### **Opportunity to take over the often ungoverned spaces of project initiation**

At the present time there are many different avocations which get involved in project initiation processes and decision-making. Dalcher 2014 describes a relatively common situation regarding front-end decisions – here in the context of requirements management, as follows.

...requirements management .....is an often ignored aspect of project elaboration that is done by business analysts, systems analysts, systems engineers or requirement engineers.

If project management does not actively take over these responsibilities, or at the very least management of these responsibilities, the chances are that some other avocation may well do so.

This would be an opportunity lost for project management, particularly in light of the fact that project managers are undoubtedly better qualified to consolidate the management of project initiation activities than any other avocation.

### **Opportunity to add value, and to be seen to be doing so**

If project management actively manages “front end” activities, it adds value to customers over and above execution-only approaches – and can be seen to be doing so. Thus, adoption of the emergent paradigm is advantageous for both the customers and project management.

## **DISCIPLINE-OR-PROFESSION RELATED CONSEQUENCES FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

As I see it, another consequence of the co-existence of two quite different project management paradigms is that it makes it difficult for many project management associations and other representative bodies to claim that project management can be classified even as a discipline (let alone as a profession).

With regard to defining the noun ‘discipline’ in this context, both the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary and Australia’s Macquarie Concise Dictionary focus on a discipline as a branch of learning or scholarly instruction. This is rather too generalised for our purposes. A more detailed interpretation comes from Morris 2013:231, who quotes Paul Griseri 2002 as follows.

a discipline suggests ... that there must be a shared understanding of the key issues and the key ways of investigating these. ... There may be controversy and disagreements about specifics ... [but] ... there is general agreement about the overall range of subjects ... about the problems, presumptions, paradigms or methodologies of investigation.

If we accept Griseri's description, then project management would not qualify as a discipline, mainly because of lack of general agreement in relation to the two different co-existing paradigms. This lack of agreement also applied to the overall range of subjects, as is partly reflected in differences in the two main Western bodies of knowledge of project management, for example.

However, as far as I can see, many advocates of the traditional paradigm do not regard the emergent paradigm as properly representative of project management – and of course vice versa. This situation creates problems in certain situations with regard to the perceived credibility of project management, and allied matters. This should be a matter of real concern for project management and its representative institutions.

## **SUMMARY**

The main theme of this article is that there are two different co-existing paradigms of project management, and that this creates some significant consequences. These primarily revolve around the fact that the traditional paradigm is widely followed, but that, in various ways, this inhibits wider adoption of the emergent paradigm, to the detriment of project management at large, and its customers, as now summarised.

1. One consequence is that the traditional paradigm gives potential customers the impression that project management is only concerned with the narrow task of project delivery (and making a profit whilst doing so), and not with the broader issue of helping satisfy the broader needs of its customers.
2. In these circumstances, customers are also unaware of the potential for project management to add value by being involved in project initiation activities. This lack of awareness disadvantages both those who provide emergent project management services, and customers of project management at large.
3. Another factor is that with the traditional paradigm, failures which are due to project-initiation causes are still commonly blamed on project management, even if project managers have not been involved in the project initiation activities. Therefore, if for no other reason than self-preservation, and some semblance of control over its own destiny, the least that project management can do is to extend the traditional paradigm to ensure that the initiation processes have been properly undertaken.
4. The most expeditious way of ensuring that this is done effectively is for project management to be directly involved in all initiation activities – i.e. that it moves from the traditional paradigm to the emergent one. This not only puts project management properly in charge of its own destiny, but, as already noted, it has high potential for adding value at the front end.
5. At the present time there are many different avocations which get involved in project initiation processes and decision-making. If project management does not actively take over these responsibilities, the chances are that some other



avocation is likely to do so. This would be an opportunity lost for project management, particularly in light of the fact that it is undoubtedly better suited to consolidate the management of project initiation activities than any other avocation.

6. Finally, it was noted that another consequence of there being two quite different project management paradigms is that it makes it difficult for many project management associations and similar representative bodies to claim that project management can be classified even as a discipline, let alone as a profession.

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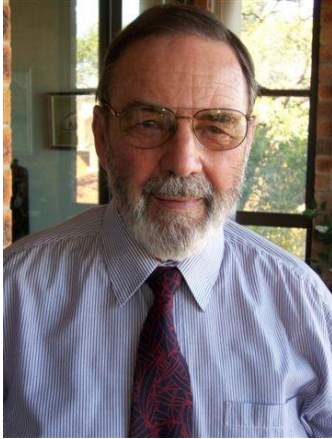
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**Alan Stretton** is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 160 professional articles and papers.

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