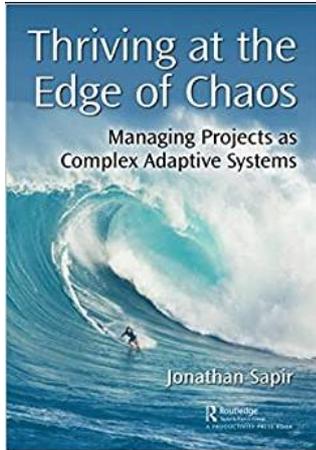


## PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW



Book Title: ***Thriving at the Edge of Chaos; Managing Projects as Complex Adaptive Systems***

Author: **Jonathan Sapir**

Publisher: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

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Reviewer: **Shauna Skolnick**

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### Introduction

“Thriving at the Edge of Chaos” presents a compelling argument for embracing uncertainty rather than avoiding it. Sapir offers a framework for a total paradigm shift in methodology that would allow businesses to *thrive* in today’s modern, complex, rapidly changing world. This new mindset rejects the ineffective, rigid, yesteryear concepts of project management based around detailed planning and prediction, and replaces them with a more flexible Complex Adaptive System (CAS) methodology. Managing projects in a fluid system built to react favorably to change and chaos leads to *skillfully* riding the wave of unpredictability, and ultimately accelerating success and facilitating innovation.

This book boldly challenges the stagnant standard operating procedures and principles of project management and forces us to consider whether they are too archaic to be effective anymore. In short, we cannot do today’s job with yesterday’s tools. It’s time for an upgrade; it’s time to retool.

As our world evolves into a more advanced, complex, dare we say *chaotic* environment, the methodologies with which we work must also evolve so that we can successfully *thrive at the edge of chaos*. This new perspective, applying CAS thinking to the field of Project Management, would improve efficiency and productivity, generate new ideas, increase personal ownership and accountability, as well as shorten timelines, reduce costs and the need for micro-management and provide better products overall.

Offering poignant examples of successful companies that have embraced this shift and reaped great rewards because of it, Sapir makes a strong case in favor of adopting CAS - breaking the old mold may not be easy, but the alternative in such a competitive world is to become obsolete.

## Overview of Book's Structure

The book first defines the concept of Complexity Science, and describes how to best apply it to the world of Project Management. Sapir then lays out the most common current status quo problems, the unintended consequences, and daily struggles project managers often face. He then skillfully demonstrates how a CAS solution would benefit project management for each area of focus providing relevant examples for all phases; Planning/Design, Task Scheduling, Execution, Resource Allocation, Monitoring, and Optimization.

Throughout the book, Sapir compares the benefits of this new method against the dangers of the current status quo so the reader has relevant examples with which to form an opinion about the best direction true visionaries should go.

## Highlights

It may seem counter-intuitive, but the CAS model it is exactly the concept that *thriving* companies such as UBER, Lyft, VRBO, AirBnB have built flourishing businesses upon. In fact, these are visionary businesses that have completely disrupted their traditional respective industries. It is what sets them apart from the others, barely functioning under old methodologies.

While operating at the “Edge of Chaos” sounds scary, it is the future, and those without methods to manage business in an ever-changing environment will find themselves struggling, if not now, then soon. Adaptation is critical to survival, and with modern globalization and advanced technology, the world is quickly becoming more dynamic. There aren't many businesses that can claim a steadily, growing linear business based an antiquated model of perfect planning and predictability year after year. The world is simply moving too fast, so it's time to catch up or be left behind. Sapir reminds us that change is indeed inevitable, and adopting CAS is the next wave.

Planning, task scheduling, resource allocation, timelines, status reporting – are all becoming harder to effectively predict and determine ahead of time. Spending time over-thinking each and every possible scenario, risk, and contingency is exhausting, and often proves futile. Scheduling and rescheduling tasks have become commonplace. Inefficient multi-tasking is part of the job, bottlenecks are created where issues are being “resolved.” Pushing timelines back and readjusting expectations have become the norm and as a result, project timelines are often “padded” with extra cushion – time built in for exceptions.

Are these the telltale signs of an inept Project Manager or should we finally consider breaking the mold of an antiquated process? The cascading effects of delays causing subsequent delays is a reflection of an old methodology's inability to incorporate change in a fluid manner. “Thriving at the Edge of Chaos” reminds us that this is not a viable business plan for the future. We obviously cannot avoid uncertainty or the business market variables of the 21<sup>st</sup> century organization. But to effectively embrace

today's complex business environment and optimize outcomes, it's time for a new business model – CAS.

### **Highlights: What I liked!**

First, this book lays out easy step-by-step practical CAS application for each area of focus within Project Management.

Second, there are real life illustrations of flourishing CAS environments such as the US stock market, the human immune system, raising a child, urban planning, ant colonies – all complex adaptive systems with complex patterns and interrelated components. The dynamics of the overall system. To think there could be a perfect project management outline that could successfully “manage” any of these systems without embracing change is absurd.

The analogy of a surfer riding the waves provides a clear image of “thriving at the edge of chaos.” Anyone who has watched surfers in action can relate to their constant need to react, adjust, and push toward the goal (the shore) or risk being crushed. In surfing, there is no extensive planning or charting, no meetings to discuss contingencies for water temperature, or extensive analysis for average wave heights and variances. Surfers just ride the tube, taking all “x factors” into consideration and applying them real-time. THIS is CAS!

Third, it is noteworthy to recognize that some of today's most ground breaking businesses with record growth have embraced some kind of Complex Adaptive System (CAS). Sapir makes the concept easy to grasp, a simple process where participants operate somewhat autonomously and completely interdependently within a simple set of guidelines, eliminating the need for centralized control, oversight or micro-management. A system that enables participants rather than directs them, focused on achieving a clear purpose or common goal.

### **Who might benefit from the Book?**

Professionals focused in Project Management would benefit from reading “Thriving at the Edge of Chaos.” First, to challenge themselves to think differently and push the boundaries of status quo. Second, because too many companies stand in their own way of success, scared to challenge the status quo and therefore struggling to stay relevant. Project Managers in all industries can be the force that propels business forward into a new way of thinking.

Other corporate leaders, executives, managers, business analysts would also benefit from this quick read. Learning how to tolerate, and even embrace, chaos and change rather than controlling, planning and predicting every possible scenario seems critical today. Managing projects with a CAS methodology would empower employees, increase urgency and build a culture of shared ownership, as well as risks.

These are concepts that would enable one to *ride the wave*, and avoid getting swept away in the under tow.

## Conclusion

Rigid processes do not allow enough flexibility to juggle today's complexities. Sapir offers a fresh new theory for Project Management, CAS models that are perfect for dealing with this kind of uncertainty. It challenges the old methods of project management, the Gantt chart, and detailed planning. It will take you out of your comfort zone, but Sapir suggests accepting project management as a complex system with a flexible structure where interdependent parts work together as a whole and adapt to changes will produce the best results.

This new CAS paradigm welcomes change, *thrives* on uncertainty, develops adaptable flexible plans, and promotes self-managed interdependent parts that rely on one another but do not wait on one another. It is a system with loose guidelines that support business rather than strict policies and procedures that stifle it.

In such a dynamic, competitive business world, the risk becoming obsolete is too great not to consider managing projects as Complex Adaptive Systems. Don't sit idle and watching others pass you by, "Thriving at the Edge of Chaos."

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For more about this book, go to: <https://www.routledge.com/Thriving-at-the-Edge-of-Chaos-Managing-Projects-as-Complex-Adaptive-Systems/Sapir/p/book/9780367404642>

*Editor's note: This book review was the result of a partnership between the publisher, PM World and the [PMI Dallas Chapter](#). Authors and publishers provide the books to PM World; books are delivered to the PMI Dallas Chapter, where they are offered free to PMI members to review; book reviews are published in the PM World Journal and PM World Library. PMI Dallas Chapter members can keep the books as well as claim PDUs for PMP recertification when their reviews are published.*

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## About the Reviewer



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**Shauna Skolnick** is a Technology Staffing Industry leader with 20 years of experience managing high-volume critical business operations. She has focused her career on National Account Resource Planning, Talent Acquisition, Team Training, and Performance Management & Metrics. Her success is attributed to providing quality technical resources required to support Fortune 100 clients and Federal Government Secret/Top Secret Cleared engagements.

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