

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Mindful Project Management: Resilient Performance Beyond the Risk Horizon ²

By Elmar Kutsch

Many authors treat projects with a strongly ‘mechanistic’ approach. The work can be broken down, executed and controlled as a series of interlocking parts. This is the technical, engineering-based conceptualisation, derived from the roots of the subject in large research and development projects. While acknowledging the many benefits of this view, we take a slightly different approach. We, in the book *Mindful Project Management: Resilience Performance beyond the Risk Horizon*, understand projects as ‘organic’ constructs, living and mindful entities existing for a finite period of time, consisting of people, supported by structures and processes. To continue the biological metaphor, this mindful organism is constantly challenged by environmental adversity. Success depends on remaining resilient, which we view as the ability to mindfully notice, interpret, prepare for, and consistently to contain and recover from such adversity.

Towards a self-evidently correct framework

Mankind has achieved magnificent project outcomes for thousands of years. Marvels such as the Pyramids of Giza, the Great Wall of China, the Parthenon, and Stonehenge were constructed without modern-day techniques and software tools, although often with abundant yet expendable human resources. The twentieth century, though, experienced a new age of industrialisation and a drive towards repeatability of manufacturing outputs, mass-production and the pursuit of greater order and efficiency. Considered a milestone in the development of project management, Henry Gantt (1861–1919) developed the Gantt Chart. It illustrates the phases and tasks of a project schedule so that they can be understood easily.

The 1950s marked the emergence of the ‘Program Evaluation and Review Technique’ (PERT), deployed and exercised in the Polaris missile submarine programme. PERT displays how much time (involving the most likely, optimistic and pessimistic estimates) is allocated to a component of a project, such as a project task. It lays down interdependencies between these components that allow the definition of a critical path; any deviation or change from that path will have an automatic influence on the end date of the project.

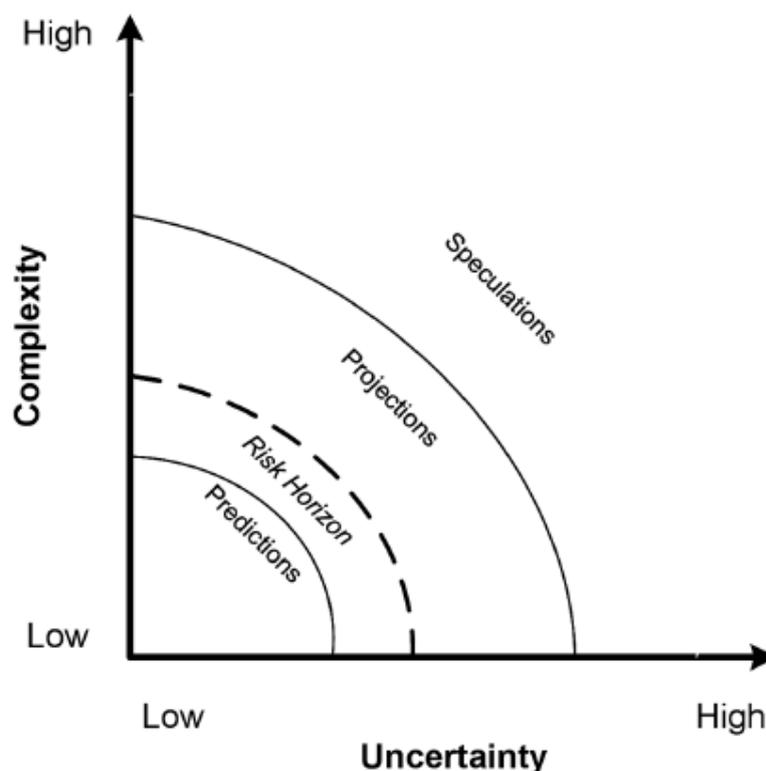
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Such techniques are now commonly applied in planning modern projects and often represent the core technique of management by planning. However, it was not until the 1960s that the development of these techniques led to the recognition of project management as a discipline. In 1969, the Project Management Institute (PMI) was founded. This not-for-profit project management organisation is one of the most recognised member associations in the world. It advocates providing project managers with a universal set of tools and techniques to manage projects successfully. As a consequence, the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) Guide was published in 1987. Over the years, further internationally recognised frameworks and sourcebooks in project management have been developed, such as PRINCE2 and the Association for Project Management's (APM) Body of Knowledge. They form part of a wider narrative advocating a set of normative procedures that, if applied correctly, will lead to success.

Beyond the risk horizon

The further out we move, though, the greater the amount of epistemic uncertainty we are faced with through diminishing precision, and situations that are more open to interpretation, projections and speculations. Traditional project management tools and techniques may well be limited in helping us with epistemic uncertainty. Instead of focusing predominantly on hindsight as a predictor for the future, we need mindful approaches to deal with projections and speculations, so we are not caught out by the complexity in a project.



A mindful approach to project management, as the term states, relies on harnessing the amazing power of the human mind. The human brain is an amazing and incredibly powerful machine of synapses and neurons. But the brain is also fallible. It is not a super-computer, but has evolved as a social machine. The information it receives is partial and localised (what we sometimes call culture). As a result, our behaviour is subject to cognitive biases, those annoying glitches in our thinking that cause us to make questionable decisions and reach erroneous conclusions. We are emotional and partial beings – we are human. It is important to distinguish between cognitive biases and logical fallacies. A logical fallacy is an error in logical argumentation (e.g. ad hominem attacks, slippery slopes, circular arguments, appeal to force, etc.). A cognitive bias, on the other hand, is a genuine deficiency or limitation in our thinking – a flaw in judgement that arises from errors of memory, social attribution, and miscalculations (such as statistical errors or a false sense of probability).

As a result, we frequently behave mindlessly in the way we deal with uncertainty, in the way we perceive it, in the way we understand it and in the way we respond to it. These behavioural ‘shortcomings’ feature in most aspects of project work. People can walk, to some extent, ‘brainlessly’ through projects, driven by the original plan and what they are told to do.

In order to deal with our fallibilities, our propensity to be mindless, in the book *Mindful Project Management: Resilience Performance beyond the Risk Horizon*, we suggest examples of ‘good practice’ – what a project manager could do (with an emphasis on ‘could’). We want to emphasise that anything we suggest could be done to manage epistemic uncertainty is context-specific. What works in one context may not work in another. These are not hard-and-fast rules. In addition, we neither claim that the suggested practices to manage adversity comprise a complete set of actions, nor that they are invariably the practices that make a project more mindful and thus more resilient. Rather, they are prompts to think differently about ways to acquire resilience. Please use this book to think about how our suggestions might apply to your own circumstances. Ask yourself why you might apply some and not others. Elaborate on the pros and cons. Do not fall prey to the temptation to take on a practice without tailoring it to your projects and, worse, without the support and buy-in of senior leaders and stakeholders.

A tool to enhance our ability to venture beyond the risk horizon: Scenario Planning

A plethora of literature exists about planning tools and techniques in project management. Much of such frameworks provide an authoritative account of what one should do. There appears to be less discourse about the assumptions underpinning these techniques, and therefore about the underlying basis for the planning techniques in use. One promising tool – Scenario Planning – stands out as driving mindful thinking, yet its use has not been widespread, and it is not often advocated within the project practitioner literature.

While Scenario Planning has its origins in military strategy studies, it was transformed into a business tool by, among others, Wack (e.g. 1985) and Schoemaker (e.g. 1995). In contrast to risk management that drives the anticipation of individual risks, scenario planning caters for multiple future realities and encourages thinking in extremes, both possible and plausible.

The aim of scenario planning is the definition of a group of possible and plausible (not necessarily probable) futures that should constructively challenge each other. In comparison with traditional risk management, this approach does not aim to focus attention on quantifying a single future; instead, it provides multiple, more abstract projections of alternative futures.

Scenario Planning is a powerful tool if applied in a non-threatening environment. For scenario planning to take effect, the culture of a project needs to be 'open-minded' with:

1. Receptiveness to multiple, sometimes divergent, perspectives.
2. Openness to having one's views questioned and challenged.
3. The use of a leader or facilitator who can manage the process of scenario planning in a controlled but non-threatening manner.
4. Willingness to provide resources to deal with essential issues that may occur.
5. Acknowledgement that scenarios are uncertain in their predictive power and that the 'truth' will not be forthcoming through this technique.

There is much written about scenario planning, so we will provide just a brief overview here of the critical stages that we need to work through.

What is mindful about Scenario Planning and a Premortem?

Scenario planning exercises open decision-makers to numerous, plausible alternative "stories of the future" that inherently challenge assumptions and mindsets. Corporations including Shell and governments including Singapore have used such practices - first and foremost for their heuristic value - with considerable success for decades. Much like being mindful, the practice of nonjudgmentally assessing different plausible futures is a practical way of shining light on old unexamined thought patterns and making room for new ideas.

Traditional project management techniques enable us to plan for a single future in a deterministic, probabilistic fashion. Hence, reinforcing this 'anchor', driven into the 'ground' – our expectations – and allowing it to drive our actions in a preloaded, autopilot manner. Scenario Planning though enables us to 'zoom out' beyond that single prediction of a plan. Our mind is challenged by the definition of multiple and extreme scenarios.

The idea of the project premortem could be useful here. A project premortem is a strategy for assessing the strength of a project before it ever happens. For project leaders and team members, the premortem works by assuming the worst - that the project has failed - and then looking for all the ways and reasons why. By doing this, the team can figure

out where potential problems lie and what pitfalls may present themselves to avoid disaster and help the project succeed.

In essence, a premortem focusses our mind to how we can prevent a worst-case scenario from happening. As such, we may change our way of engaging with a project: Instead of 'selling' the illusion of certainty, we draw our and our stakeholder's attention towards our capability to prevent a worst-case scenario from materialising, with the option of ending up with more beneficial alternative scenarios.

Ultimately, Scenario Planning makes us more uncomfortable, as a trigger of mindful thinking, generating a more discriminatory view beyond the risk horizon. Nevertheless, it also focuses our attention to those capabilities that are required to avert a crisis in the first place.

Outlook

The concept of resilience through aspects of mindfulness, in projects, is not new to either academics or practitioners. There is, though, a plethora of evidence about the usefulness of reducing human cognition as a source of error by replacing it with rules, applied consistently and transparently. The weight of such evidence seems overwhelming, measured by the number of planning processes and associated accreditation programmes being advocated as 'self-evidently correct'.

Nevertheless, there is growing concern about this single-minded approach to managing uncertainty in a past-informed, rule-based manner. This is underlined by significant disasters resulting in injury, loss of life and substantial financial costs. Some alternative approaches are being considered, focusing on the contribution of the mind. However, these progressive discussions on how situated human cognition can benefit the management of uncertainty do not appear to be part of the mainstream of project management, at least from a practitioner's perspective. There is still a very much unchallenged pursuit of ever greater consistency of action. Although our book should be understood as a challenge to conventional wisdom in project management, we cannot claim that it provides the 'Holy Grail' for managing uncertainty. Evidence about mindfulness and its impact is still limited, although growing, and so this book is more a proposition than a prescription. Its purpose is fulfilled even if you disagree with everything we said. A disagreement is a form of reflection, and this book - *Mindful Project Management: Resilience Performance beyond the Risk Horizon* - should be a basis for reflection.

References

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About the Author



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Being uncomfortable is both a challenge and an opportunity for Elmar. As a passionate Skydiver his interests, both privately and professionally, revolve around the management of the unexpected. Elmar's first real exposure to the rather paradox world of uncertainty began in 1998, when he held a variety of commercial and senior management positions within the Information Technology (IT) industry. Working for one of the biggest ITservice providers in Germany, Elmar was responsible for the successful delivery of a number of large projects, including major roll-out and outsourcing strategies. Clients included the banks Commerzbank, the Deutsche Börse (German Stock Exchange) and the Polizei Rheinland Pfalz (State Police Rhineland Palatinate). His passion for the management of risk and uncertainty in projects then led him to pursue a career in academia. He served as a Lecturer in Operations Management at the University of Surrey and has been at Cranfield since 2007.