

Towards a “higher purpose” for project management representative bodies?¹

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

This article has been prompted by some materials in Pells’ 2021 editorial “Project management needs a higher purpose”, particularly those relating to what I am going to describe as project management (PM) representative bodies – broadly covering project management institutes, associations, and similar bodies).

This article focuses on one particular area of Pells’ exploration of “mission statements among the world’s most influential project management societies and professional bodies” – namely his critique of three PM representative bodies whose vision statements include an aspiration that “all projects succeed”. His objection is that “not all projects should succeed; many projects should never even be started”. In other words, someone has failed to choose the “right” projects in the first place (to borrow a convenient vernacular descriptor from Cooke-Davies 2004).

The implied question is, “What is the position of project management (PM) representative bodies with regard to PM involvement in helping choose the ‘right’ projects?” This question is largely unanswered in any substantive way in the project management literature. However, it appears to me that this could be seen as an opportunity area for PM representative bodies to move towards a “higher purpose” – namely the promotion and achievement of increased involvement by project management in the initial choice of projects. This is the main subject of this article.

ONGOING DEFICIENCIES IN CHOOSING THE “RIGHT” PROJECTS

Deficiencies in choosing the “right” projects create “lose-lose” situations

It virtually goes without saying that, if the “right” project is not chosen, there will be multiple losers, be they sponsors, owners, users, or other stakeholders.

External providers of project management services are not excluded – even if they make a profit on an individual project, they stand to suffer a loss of reputation if it is a failure because it is a “wrong” project.

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“Wrong” project choices account for up to 40% of so-called “project” failures

Some earlier work I did on causes of so-called “project failure” – admittedly with only sparse available data – indicated that something of the order of 40% of such failures were due to decisions made prior to authorisation to proceed (e.g. Stretton 2018a). I do not know how much of this was due to bad choice of projects, and how much to inadequate specification of requirements, or other causes. However, the overall figure of 40% of failures which is totally outside the control of project management is an alarming one, and there can be little doubt that failure to choose the “right” projects would be a significant contributor to this figure.

Project mgt. is often blamed for these, but is seldom involved in project choice

As we will see later, there are some exceptions to this situation, but in the vast majority of cases project management will not have been involved in choosing the projects which it undertakes. However, as just indicated, it is quite likely to be blamed for the failure of its project, even if it had no involvement in choosing the “wrong” project in the first place.

So, who is to blame for poor choices of projects?

Many different entities or groups could be blamed for poor choices of projects

There are likely to be a large number of potential perpetrators, depending on the particular contexts in which projects are being considered, available people skills/specialisations, etc..

I do not have a ready-made list which examples the variety of people who could be involved in making choices of projects. However, defining the project requirements could be seen as an integral part of this process, and has been expressly identified in some of my earlier studies as a specific cause of project failure. Further, Dalcher 2014 commented on the variety of avocations which could be involved, as follows.

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

But no particular group can be targeted to be educated re better project choice

Overall, it is evident is that there is no one group of decision makers or avocations who could be identified as an obvious specific candidate for substantive education in making better decisions in choosing and specifying the “right” projects. There are simply too many possible candidate groups.

Therefore, it is up to project mgt. itself to do something about better choices

This, then, may suggest that we return to project management, and look more closely at ways in which it might extend its scope to have a greater influence in choosing the projects which it is called on to manage.

At the level of individual organisations and projects there are some instances where project management becomes involved in the initial choice of projects – as will be discussed again shortly.

However, at a broader level, is there any way project management can advance the cause of becoming more involved in effective choice of projects? What body or bodies has or have sufficient established standing in the broader community to be able to effectively represent project management in this context?

Overall, PM rep. bodies appear to be the only entities able to facilitate this

The way I see it, the answers to these questions lie squarely in the domain of PM representative bodies. If the latter do not do all they can to help ensure the “right” projects are chosen, the chances are that we will continue to have these ongoing problems with poor project choices. I say this because I don’t see signs of any other bodies or entities of equivalent stature stepping in to help solve this problem.

It is noted that the World Project Management Forum has similar interests – but it is essentially a forum, and does not currently have the stature to potentially influence major global events in the way long-established PM representative bodies appear to have.

This suggests a potential “higher purpose” for PM representative bodies

In these circumstances, I believe it is in everyone’s best interests for PM representative bodies to take an active lead here – in other words, to develop a “higher purpose” in this domain, by promoting measures for project management to be in a position to more directly influence the choice of the projects which it then manages.

They are already a little way down this “higher purpose” track, as some PM representative bodies’ “standards” do have cases of PM involvement in project choices, as will be discussed shortly.

In addition, there are substantial materials on project management involvement in the choice of projects elsewhere in the wider project management literature. These are not currently represented to any significant extent in the publications of PM representative bodies, and we will be discussing possibilities for the latter to also incorporate these materials, and build on them, and build up a definitive consolidation of the many ways in which project management can currently, and potentially, contribute to making better choices of projects.

THE CURRENT SITUATION WITH PROJECT CHOICE AND PM REP. BODIES

PM representative bodies are primarily concerned with doing projects “right”

Project execution/delivery

It appears that virtually all PM representative bodies have been, and largely still are, primarily concerned with project execution/delivery. There are historic reasons for this, and very strong reasons for their continuing to be concerned with delivering projects “right” – simply because the latter all too often still does not happen. PM representative bodies therefore cannot, and should not, dilute efforts to improve success rates on project delivery.

Project definition/development

Although varying considerably between PM representative bodies, by and large “front end” project definition/development still tends to be under-represented as a project management responsibility in these bodies’ publications and publicity. It is not altogether clear why this should be so, as this extension to project delivery can be highly value-adding. It is also, of course, concerned with doing the project “right”.

Choices of projects in PM rep. bodies’ “standards” are usually made by others

Many PM representative bodies have bodies of knowledge or similar “standards”, which provide guidelines for doing projects “right”. However, the choice of projects discussed in these guidelines has generally been made by others, with little if any input from project management.

I have long regarded this situation as being an elephant in the project management room. This is because the project management literature has tended to turn a blind eye to the facts that so many “wrong” projects are undertaken; that they are chosen by others; and that until project management itself has a greater say in choosing the projects it undertakes, it has diminished chances of acquiring the status it seeks in being recognised as a wider contributor to society at large.

However, there are some examples of project management involvement in project choices in a few “standards” on portfolio & program management, as now discussed.

Some PM “standards” do have cases of PM involvement in project choices

Although not strongly publicised by PM representative bodies, in recent years there have been an increasing number of cases in their literature on portfolio and program management which include PM involvement in project selection. As Pells notes,

Portfolio management and the selection of the ‘right projects’, of course, moves program and project management into the strategic planning space, which has happened in recent years.

Portfolio management & ‘Strategic investment’ portfolio management

As Dalcher 2020 points out,

The 7th edition of the APM Body of Knowledge reasons that ‘*portfolios are used to select, prioritise and control an organisation’s programmes and projects in line with its strategic objectives and capacity to deliver*’ (APM 2019: p. 13).

However, as Dalcher also points out, the term *portfolio management* can mean different things to different people. In particular, it often will not include selection of projects. As I pointed out in Stretton 2020I, I prefer to use the explicit descriptor ‘*Strategic investment’ portfolio management* in the above APM context.

Program management & ‘Strategic initiative’ program management

We have a somewhat similar situation with program management. Thiry 2016 points out that the third edition of PMI’s *Standard for Program Management* defines programs as:

a means of executing corporate strategies and achieving business or organisational goals and objectives.(PMI 2013, p.4).

The third edition of Japan’s P2M says much the same thing.

After the program mission is gained from the business strategy as a concept, a program is created to carry out the program strategy (PMAJ 2015, p.32)

Although not explicitly stated as such, there is an implication in the above that program management could be involved in the original choice of its component projects, at least in some cases. To cater for the above, I have labelled the types of program management in these two quotations as ‘*Strategic initiative’ program management*, following their emphases on strategies, and on program initiatives deriving there-from. This label is intended to distinguish them from the more common usage of program management, which tends to focus on the narrower context of management of multiple projects in operational modes.

Both can, or do, include involvement in choice of projects

Now, I do not know the extent to which the project choice components of ‘*strategic investment’ portfolio management*, and the ‘*strategic initiative’ program management* version of program management, are actually undertaken in practice.

But they are evidently extensive enough to have attracted substantial attention in the literature, and could/should act as a foundation for the addition of other types of project-management-related involvement in the choice of projects from the wider project management literature, as now discussed.

Opportunities for PM rep. bodies to add cases from the wider PM literature

Two particular types of project management involvement in the choice of projects – namely Front End Loading (FEL) and Client Needs Determination (CND) – have been practised for well over half a century. They are reasonably well documented in the wider project management literature, but receive little attention in the literature of PM representative bodies.

However, it would seem to be both logical, and desirable, for PM representative bodies to actively embrace and endorse these “choosing the ‘right’ project” techniques – and any other such techniques that exist – and to incorporate them into a consolidated group, as now discussed.

ADDING/ CONSOLIDATING DATA ON PM INVOLVEMENT IN PROJECT CHOICE

Adding Front End Loading (FEL) type of PM involvement in project choices

I have written about FEL quite extensively over the years, most recently in Stretton 2021b and Stretton 2020f. I will simply reproduce here part of how I described this in the first reference.

Morris 2013:60 describes FEL as follows:

IPA [Independent Project Analysis], the oil, gas and minerals project benchmarking company, coined the useful term ‘Front-End Loading’: ...(FEL) is a tool for determining which is the “right” project to meet the needs of business. The FEL tool assesses the level of definition of a number of critical items that are used to determine what, if any, asset should be built to meet a particular business need.

Front End Loading (FEL) services are widely deployed in large complex projects, notably by EPC (Engineering, Procurement, Construction) organisations. In overall monetary terms they represent a significant proportion of all project-related activity.

Adding Client Needs Determination (CND) contributions to PM project choices

I have discussed Client Needs Determination (CND) as practiced in Civil & Civic from the 1960s in many previous articles in this journal, starting with Stretton 2013e. It was a very substantial part of Civil & Civic’s business in the quarter of a century I was with the organisation.

I noted that this extended project-related service was actually a dual process of first, helping client organisations clarify their strategic business needs, and then helping them develop the most appropriate strategic initiatives – and thence projects – to best help satisfy these needs.

I know that other project-based organisations also offer this type of service, but have no data on the overall extent of CND services and similar types of contributions.

Consolidating & adding further techniques for helping choose “right” project

It appears to me that PM representative bodies are particularly well placed to assemble and consolidate all the above techniques for helping choose the “right” projects, together with any others they can find. In fact, they seem to be the only entities that have the potential capabilities needed to be able to do this effectively.

Even more importantly, they are certainly the only entities which have the stature in a broader context to be in a position to effectively publicise these types of extended project management capabilities in helping choose the “right” projects in ways that could facilitate demand for such services.

Publicising this assemblage of PM skills for helping choose “right” projects

From the above, we can see that PM representative bodies are well placed to assemble a substantial array of techniques for helping to choose the “right” projects. I would go further to suggest that if they do not take up this role, we will continue to have these ongoing problems with poor project choices. There certainly do not appear to be any other bodies or entities of anything like equivalent stature which would be willing and able to step up and help solve this problem.

The above proposes a specific “higher purpose” for PM representative bodies

Pells 2021 suggests that project management needs a higher purpose. I have essentially argued that it seems to have little chance of achieving higher purposes unless, and until, it acquires a reasonable say in the choice of projects it undertakes. That is not necessarily the whole story, but I believe it almost certainly constitutes a substantial part of it.

I have suggested that this could constitute a “higher purpose” for project management representative bodies, simply because they appear to be so uniquely well placed to assemble all existing materials on PM involvement in choosing projects, consolidating them, and publicising and facilitating their use in helping entities in business and society at large make better choices of projects. There do not appear to be any other realistic candidates to do this.

This type of “higher purpose”, if effectively implemented, could provide considerable benefits to wide swathes of business and society at large, as well as a more expansive role for project management itself.

In the first part of his editorial, Pells discussed many outreach initiatives already being undertaken by PM representative bodies such as PMI, APM and IPMA. These include climate change policy, responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, negotiating crises, sustainable development goals, rebuilding the economy, and dealing with complex social change.

Many of these initiatives also include partnering with others in a variety of different types of social outreach activities and the like. Further, there has been substantial encouragement and support for members of PM representative bodies to volunteer in helping “address problems, resolve issues and meet needs around the globe”.

These many “activities, initiatives and programs achieved or underway” very clearly indicate the extent to which many PM representative bodies are already committed to expanding the range and influence of their activities. This very strongly suggests to me that, not only are PM representative bodies very well placed to undertake the “higher purpose” of assembling, consolidating and promulgating PM capability in helping a wide range of business and societal entities choose the “right” projects, but that they would appear to already have appropriate motivation to undertake this type of work.

Perhaps I am reading too much into the above. But this does appear to me to be a major opportunity area for PM representative bodies. It will be interesting to see if they also see things this way.

SUMMARY/ DISCUSSION

This article was prompted by Pells’ 2021 editorial “Project management needs a higher purpose” – both the broad topic, and his particular observation that “not all projects should succeed”.

We started with the second topic, which was addressed in the context of project management normally having no involvement in choosing the projects it undertakes. It was first noted that deficiencies in choosing the “right” projects create “lose-lose” situations all round. I then indicated that some earlier work I had done showed that “wrong” project choices could account for up to 40% of all so-called “project” failures. Project management is often blamed for these, but is seldom involved in the choice of the projects.

Looking at who is to blame for poor choices of projects, many different entities or groups could be blamed, reflecting the great variability of contexts in which projects are chosen. This means that no particular group can be targeted in trying to ensure that better project choices are made. In these circumstances, it appears to me that it is up to project management itself to do something about trying to ensure that better choices are made. I concluded that, on a broad scale, PM representative bodies appear to be the only entities able to facilitate this – which suggested a potential “higher purpose” for these bodies.

The current situation with PM representative bodies is that they are primarily concerned with doing projects “right”. Further, in their “standards” and allied publications, choices of projects are usually made by others. However, some PM “standards” do have cases of where project management is involved in project choices.

We briefly discussed cases of such involvement in ‘*strategic investment*’ portfolio management, and what I describe as the ‘*strategic initiative*’ program management version of program management. The fact that these cases are already recorded in their literature was seen as a potential opportunity for PM representative bodies to add cases from the wider PM literature, and to consolidate and publicise this assemblage.

So, we briefly discussed adding Front End Loading (FEL) type of PM involvement in project choices, notably in the large complex project domain, and Client Needs Determination (CND) involvement from other domains. We went on to discuss the potential for project management representative bodies to consolidate all the above; add other known techniques for helping choose “right” project; and publicise this assemblage of PM-related skills in helping choose the “right” projects.

Finally, it was suggested that the above proposes a specific “higher purpose” for PM representative bodies, which could benefit many areas of business and society at large, as well as providing a more expansive role for project management. It was also suggested that, in view of many outreach types of initiatives already instigated by some PM representative bodies, the latter are already committed to expanding the range and influence of their activities, and could well be motivated to undertake the above “higher purpose” initiatives.

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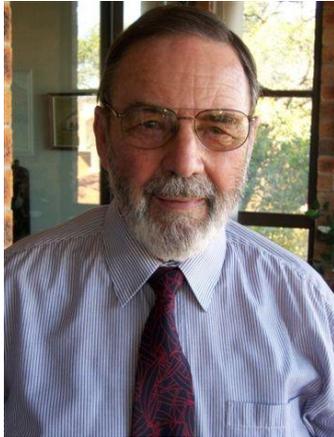
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About the Author



Alan Stretton, PhD

Faculty Corps, University of Management
and Technology, Arlington, VA (USA)

Life Fellow, AIPM (Australia)



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 230 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanilene@bigpond.com.au.

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