

Turning professional potential into social impact – the new mission for project management associations ¹

By Reinhard Wagner

In recent months, societal challenges have become increasingly apparent around the world, be it the devastating wildfires in the western parts of the United States or in the Mediterranean region, the floods in Germany and areas of central Europe, the Taliban taking power in Afghanistan and the refugee movement that has been triggered, and much more. The American President Biden even declared a "Code Red" on climate and the implications for his country. And that is just a small sample of what is happening right now and which further challenges are awaiting us in the future. This raises many questions, especially as to what role project management (Pells 2020) and project management associations (Stretton 2021a) actually play or should play in this context.

The recently deceased Peter Morris wisely wrote back in 2013 that the “challenge now surely is to focus on impact, which is why Reconstructing Project Management calls this the ‘Age of Relevance.’ This is particularly apt as mankind is currently facing some of the biggest, most serious and dangerous issues in its history, yet project management is almost totally silent on how to help address them” Morris (2013a).

Without a doubt, project management can make a valuable contribution to our ability as a society to better cope with these challenges (Wagner 2021b). These developments are even a driver for the increasing number and importance of projects, or what we nowadays call "projectification" (Wagner 2021a). However, Pells (2021) and Stretton (2021a) rightly call for greater engagement and transformation of project management associations.

Project management associations were formed in the second half of the 1960s and began to develop standards for project management (Morris 2013). The main focus was on engineering projects and how to manage them as efficiently as possible. Thus, it was primarily industry that gladly accepted qualification and later also certification offerings from the project management associations, which enabled them to significantly increase their performance over the past decades. Although project management associations have differentiated themselves further with their offerings in recent years, they are still primarily focused on the business sector and the professionalization of companies in project management.

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This, of course, also earns the money that project management associations need to statutorily reinvest in their not-for-profit activities. However, there is increasing criticism that project management associations are meanwhile merely focused on the business of qualification and certification, concentrating too strongly on the business sector and showing a rather low interest for the rest of society (Wagner, Huemann, and Radujkovic 2021). At the same time, project management associations are losing members and the certification business is also increasingly under pressure. In this respect, the question arises as to the future orientation of the associations. This does not only affect the project management associations on a national level, but also the globally active associations such as IPMA and PMI.

In this context, project management associations have a great deal of professional potential to bring to fruition. They gather not only the formally registered members, but also a large number of professionals with different competences and interests in their extensive network. Associations provide the capability to establish standards for dealing with complex tasks in the form of projects, programs and project portfolios while also imparting these standards through education, training or coaching. They are networked in their respective contexts through regional or specialist groups and achieve a wide reach through events or other forms of communication. Unfortunately, this potential has so far been used far too little to address pressing societal challenges.

Instead of defining themselves by membership numbers or the amount of certificates awarded, project management associations should rather focus on achieving a social impact in the sense of the common good. So it's not just about the basic capabilities of project management in society, but above all the deployment and tangible impact that these capabilities have in overcoming particular challenges. In humanitarian aid projects, the approach is meanwhile recognized and widely practiced. With the help of an impact chain, based on the "logframe model", it is shown which activities lead to desired results (outputs), and these to medium-term effects (outcomes). Ultimately, these contribute to an overarching and long-term result (impact).

The example of Wagner (2017) clearly shows with the case of restoration activities after the heavy earthquakes in Nepal that through project activities a multitude of outputs such as a train-the-trainer concept, a training curriculum, the establishment of earthquake-resilient homes (re-constructed during the trainings) as well as job placement for the trainees could be achieved. More importantly, the outcomes are gainful employment of economically poor and socially discriminated youth, an increasing know-how in earthquake-resilient construction of homes, which will help to avoid massive destructions during the next earthquake and a much stronger network of construction people in the community. The employment of the disadvantaged Nepalese youth will have great impact on their self-esteem, their wealth and social situation. Through the strong network of

partners and people in the case of a next disaster, the response is much faster and powerful than it was before the project.

Now imagine the benefits of such engagement of project management associations for all parties involved. The associations could significantly expand their influence, via the business community into the entire breadth of society and thus gain new members and people who are active in the field for themselves. The enterprises and professionals from the business sector would certainly be willing, e.g. on the occasion of corporate social responsibility campaigns, to contribute their project management capabilities and give something back to society. The state and the public administration would experience a concrete relief and could draw on the organizational skills of the project management associations. Last but not least, society and people affected benefit from the concrete support of project management associations through a measurable impact.

The prerequisite for a reorientation of project management associations in this sense is an awareness of the need for change, the formulation of a socially relevant vision, mission and corresponding objectives and key results (OKRs). In this context, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) certainly provide orientation. There already many initiatives and Not-for-Profit Organizations active in this context (Harding 2020), with which the project management associations could partner. Furthermore, there is a need for much better networking with the relevant social groups who, on the one hand, have their finger on the pulse of time and can better shape the portfolio of activities of project management associations than the mere functionaries. On the other hand, these groups are a valuable resource when it comes to multiplying the professional potential of the associations and their members and bringing it to fruition more quickly.

The question remains, as to when project management associations will turn their attention to addressing the "Black Elephants" (Prieto 2020) and strategically refocus?

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