

## What is Innovation Project Management? <sup>1</sup>

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In our 2021 Virtual Project Management Symposium, Michael O'Connor, Director Strategy and Project Management at Medtronic, shared his insights on this topic during his presentation, titled "*Innovation Project Management - A Practitioner's Approach.*" I would like to share his many insights and experiences here.

Dr. O'Connor, one of our PhD graduates, introduces Innovation Project Management as the intersection between leadership and project management. Innovation can be messy, complex, and takes time; when bringing project management in to meet it can help make innovation more predictable.

In terms of business need, there is a call for technical and innovation project managers. Innovation needs to happen, so the question becomes how can project management fuel that? Dr. O'Connor recommends "*Innovation Project Management*" (2019) by Dr. Harold Kerzner as a resource for this newer term. Not only did Dr. O'Connor write an excerpt for this book, but he personally worked with Dr. Kerzner to have O'Connor's product development management association and Kerzner's project management institute collaborate - which they have since done! Furthermore, PMI and PDMA are working on a microcertification for both the project manager and product manager.

Innovation is the transforming of knowledge and intellectual product into commercialization and innovation that can receive continuous improvement or disruption. There are many different types of innovation such as service and products. There is not simply one innovation path. Dr. O'Connor emphasized that innovation occurs from beginning to end and in many ways. The value of innovation can be everywhere, across service or industry, but again service and products are two of the main areas for this.

Innovation planning requires background information, projects, and portfolios. Early in the innovation process it is important to figure out *why* this innovation is going to be good for the company or organization. Market and customer needs can be difficult to discern especially with a new or disrupted market, but Dr. O'Connor encourages creativity in how that information is obtained. Portfolios need balance as well as the short-, medium- and

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<sup>1</sup> How to cite this article: Cable, J. (2021). What is Innovation Project Management? Commentary, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue I, January.

long-term innovation bets. Placing many bets can lead to one or two that move forward. Projects require resources, strategic importance, and qualified innovation project managers. No one can ever know what the project will end up looking like, but Dr. O'Connor advised "going with your gut and experience" and always reach out to your professional group!

On the topic of "Innovation and Early Feasibility", Dr. O'Connor focused on three main factors: skills, culture, and leadership. Leaders need traditional project management skills such as budgeting and scheduling skills, but soft skill and change management should also be required. Culture and innovation have changed over the past years and have made virtual and remote working additional types of skills. The lack of people being together and ability to work close to each other poses the question - how can we change that culture going forward and increase innovation? The answer to this question relies on leadership to plan how to create that time for people to work on innovation specifically.

The new way of thinking is one that expands on traditional project management. In addition to scope, schedule and cost, there is innovation project management which includes change management, digitization, and culture. As a result, the training needed, and the hiring process also evolves. Project and innovation project management managers must be trained in finance, change management, listing requirements, agile scrum, and video conferencing tools. These newly needed skills require a change in the hiring process to include increases in innovation project management titles and an understanding of what this position is and what is being looked for.

Dr. O'Connor shared his "Four Areas of Success". The first is to know your own strengths and weaknesses. He shared that the Meyers Briggs test was a relatively easy way of learning about yourself and your preferences. The second aspect is to take the Strengthsfinder Assessment which will indicate your "top strengths". The third area is the broad area often called Soft Skills. This includes being aware of your own social skills, communication, character, personality traits, attitude, social and emotional intelligence so that you can also be able to manage or improve them as needed. These things are becoming more and more important for project managers and the project profession. The last and fourth area is Communication, which Dr. O'Connor stresses is the "key to everything". Communication assures things are being done correctly and on time and therefore essential to project and innovation project management.

The Practitioner's Approach consists of multiple components that were composed and defined by Dr. O'Connor. The "Innovation Project Management Toolbox" consists of what skills and things you have in your toolbox, what you need to work on, and should be an easily renewed inventory where you decide what you need to take. "Organizational Initiatives" is where leadership claims the importance of innovation, like in the case of carving out time for innovation. For "Improve Productivity and Efficiency" the metrics must be found, such as business values and benefits realization that work for your organization. The "Increase Solutions" aspect highlights the importance of having people who are on

board with innovation as well as having an environment where there is increased ability to create solutions, and therefore an environment for innovation. “Simplicity” simply entails...keeping it simple!

Continuing the components of the Practitioner's Approach, “Leadership” is what drives the success of innovation project management by being poised for success. “Change Agents” refers to the need for change advocate agents to assist with change, something everyone deals with more every day. “Strategic Opportunity” touches on the need for innovation to be tied to strategy, and “Sustainable Consistent Innovation Cadence” speaks to having the ability to stop innovation if it is not important. A “Robust Portfolio” is something you can establish by making the hard decisions and refers to the creation of the overall portfolio. Lastly is “Build a Business Model” that ensures delivery of value to the customers and shows delivery in value.

To tie all this information together, Dr. O’Connor gave two Innovation Examples. The first was a technology project where planning included getting leadership support and support from two key stakeholders, as well as a concise plan with criteria for success. The approval process of this project consisted of the interaction process and a series of multiple stakeholder meetings. The execution was possible due to technical resources and resulted in the successful technology project being transferred into research and development.

The second example was an Innovation Project. This was a grassroots project effort that had executive buy-in from a senior leader. This led to cross-country participation and collaboration. The process included working with stakeholders, the executive buy-in, forming an elevator speech, then rinsing and repeating. The execution of this project was a *great deal* of communication. This example proves how anyone can act boldly to create a project or improvements, do not wait to be told what to do act and create!

Dr. O’Connor concludes his presentation by reiterating what he felt were the most important takeaways: Innovation Project Management requires leadership, being connected, and happens within a predetermined time frame. The New Way of Thinking relies on soft skills, change management, and digitization. The Practitioner's Approach is to ask yourself “how do I practice this way of thinking,” which Dr. O’Connor answers by stressing the importance of leadership support. He relates success to the understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses to be able to better perform at a high level. The real-world, practical applications he discussed highlight the effectiveness of innovative project management, and are a testament to why, and how, innovation can be successful in the project management space.

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The [next University of Maryland VIRTUAL Project Management Symposium](#) will be May 5-6, 2022. The event will feature 4 keynote speakers and 55 individual sessions in 5 concurrent tracks. Event information will be available September 1, 2021. If you want access to all 57 of the session recordings from the 2021 event at very low cost, visit the [2021 Project Management Symposium](#) website to register.

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## About the Author



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**John Cable** is Director of the Project Management Center for Excellence in the A. James Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland, where he has been a professor and teacher of several graduate courses in project management. His program at the University of Maryland offers masters and PhD level programs focused on project management. With more than 1,300 seats filled annually with students from many countries, including more than 40 PhD students, the program is the largest graduate program in project management at a major university in the United States.

John Cable served in the newly formed U.S. Department of Energy in 1980, where he was involved with developing energy standards for buildings, methods for measuring energy consumption, and managing primary research in energy conservation. As an architect and builder, Mr. Cable founded and led John Cable Associates in 1984, a design build firm. In 1999 he was recruited by the University of Maryland's Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering to create and manage a graduate program in project management. In his role as founder and director of the Project Management Center for Excellence at Maryland, the program has grown to offer two undergraduate minors, 3 master's degrees, and a doctoral program. Information about the Project Management Center for Project Management at the University of Maryland can be found at [www.pm.umd.edu](http://www.pm.umd.edu).

In 2002, PMI formed the Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Educational Programs (GAC). Mr. Cable was appointed to that inaugural board where he served as

vice chair. In 2006, he was elected as chairman, a role he held through 2012. As Chair of the PMI GAC, John led the accreditation of 86 project management educational programs at 40 institutions in 15 countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Asia Pacific Region. John was awarded PMI's 2012 Distinguished Contribution Award for his leadership at the GAC. He can be contacted at [jcable@umd.edu](mailto:jcable@umd.edu).

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