

## ***Projects and project management for a sustainable social impact***<sup>1</sup>

### **Projectification of society – the beauty and the beast**

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*By Dr. Reinhard Wagner*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays we observe a great busyness in our everyday life. Everywhere and at any time projects are made to realize something novel. Whether it is a project in our homes, in our community or in our clubs, in our daily work or at the level of the state. Projects are undertaken in order to realize something unprecedented, to organize something or simply to get something done. About a year ago, I had an interview with an activist from Fridays for Future who told me about her many projects. Each demonstration is planned and implemented as a project, the camps in individual cities as well as public relations activities. A similar story was told to me by those responsible for an institution serving the disabled, who carry out projects for the inclusion of handicapped people in our society. Or the internationally active charitable organization for the support of development aid projects. Many of these people and organizations use the project term as a matter of course today, but have only in the rarest cases experienced training in the application of project management. The industry often just smiles tiredly when this type of project is mentioned. Unprofessional, ineffective and efficient as well as other descriptions are used to express the disparity between project management in the business world and the rest of society. What is often overlooked is the enthusiasm with which people in civil society devote themselves to their projects, often achieving ambitious goals. Even in public administration, challenging projects are increasingly being realized, although temporary projects are clearly different from the world of public service, which is otherwise characterized by routine and consistency. What projects are you currently working on, or what new projects will the coming year bring? How much time do you spend on projects every day? How good are you at implementing projects or realizing their goals? These questions are becoming increasingly relevant to us as we move into the project society....

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<sup>1</sup> This is the sixth in a series of articles by Dr. Reinhard Wagner, PMWJ honorary global advisor and former Chair of IPMA. The series aims to position projects and project management in the context of society as social activities performed by and for people. The focus is on a sustainable social impact, which is to be achieved through the projects, and less on the management of the projects and the immediate deliverables. At the same time, projects are to be positioned as a means of self-realization through which people can jointly work for their communities, the environment or society as a whole. The series is aimed at the global community of project management practitioners, researchers, and those interested in learning about current developments in the field of project activities in society and how to achieve sustainable social impact through this engagement.

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## **Project Society - Drivers and characteristics**

The increasing number and importance of projects in our society is changing not only the business world, where projects have long been an important form of organization, but also all other areas. Building on the paradigms of planning, efficiency and controllability, among others, projects have been implemented professionally since the 1960s. Many organizations now already implement the majority of their activities in projects and can therefore be described as project-supporting or even project-based organizations. These can be found, for example, in the construction industry, the automotive sector or in consulting. Strategy, structure, processes and culture are largely aligned with projects in these companies. In the case of cross-company projects, so-called project networks are established in the longer term, in which partners jointly complete demanding tasks that none of the partners could realize alone (Lundin et al., 2015). Diverse tasks of the public sector nowadays also require competence in the realization of projects there, even if this often still lags strongly behind the economy. The tasks of the public sector include, for example, many infrastructure projects, the digitalization of administration, or the further development of the healthcare system (Hodgson et al., 2019). Without wanting to show the entire breadth of possible applications here, however, it is obvious that projects are also gaining importance in many other areas of society. In this series, examples such as refugee assistance at the municipal level in Germany or the reconstruction of houses in Nepal after an earthquake. What all these examples have in common is that demanding tasks have to be completed in limited time and with scarce resources.

What is the cause of this 'projectification' of our society? There are now many forces at work. These currently include tackling the consequences of climate change, dealing with the flow of refugees due to war, poverty and environmental damage, technological progress and much more. Jensen (2012) evoked the age of the project society a decade ago, in which everyone spends a lot of time realizing projects. In this context, projects are seen as a collaboration of several people who meet in ever-changing constellations, agree on goals together, and then disperse again after completion to pursue different goals in other constellations. Some sociologists even describe the networking of people in projects as a future form of society in which people self-actualize through mutually-beneficial connections. "The project is the occasion and reason for the connection. It temporarily assembles a very disparate group of people, and presents itself as a highly activated section of network for a period of time that is relatively short, but allows for the construction of more enduring links that will be put on hold while remaining available." (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018: 104) Project management literature is dominated by the view that projects can only be successfully completed by means of professional processes, methods and tools. A psychological, sociological or even social view of projects, their emergence, implementation and effects, is only just forming and still requires much research and discourse.

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF BECOMING A PROJECT SOCIETY**

The literature has so far devoted far too little attention to the implications of these developments for individuals in society. Here, 'Beauty and the Beast' quickly becomes apparent, i.e. the light and shadow of the developments. Projects are limited in time. People working in projects therefore have a varied and often also interesting job to do. However, there is always the question of what happens once a project ends, i.e., whether a new task is ready immediately when the project ends, or whether there are waiting periods. The world of work, which is geared toward permanent employment with employment contracts, long periods of notice and pay or careers that increase with length of service, is not very well suited to the dynamic, temporary world of projects. Here, people are hired and paid on a temporary basis and no long-term employment is guaranteed. Particularly at universities or in other project-oriented areas of our society, one continues to see people who end up in precarious living conditions as a result of temporary employment.

Another issue is the dynamic nature of projects and the ongoing need for stakeholders to adapt to a new situation and respond or accommodate flexibly. Depending on their education, upbringing and socialization, people bring with them to a greater or lesser extent the attitude and ability to deal with this dynamic. For example, industry has taught many people to use standards, routines and tools in order to achieve operational efficiencies. This quickly reaches its limits in the face of dynamically changing environmental influences and the demands of projects. As a result, people are increasingly overwhelmed, frustrated or suffer health problems (e.g. burnout). Constant changes in team composition make it difficult to build relationships that provide sufficient psychological security for those involved. This can have irreparable damage for people who rely primarily on connections in projects and have little relationship stability otherwise. Especially in times of the pandemic, with social distance and mainly virtual collaboration, reports of loneliness, illness or even depression increased.

On the one hand, projects offer flexible time allocation or time autonomy for participants, who are measured primarily by their accomplishments rather than the amount of time they spend on the project. On the other hand, the demands of projects make work-life balance increasingly difficult. For example, the time differences in internationally distributed project teams often lead to a blurring of work and leisure time. Politicians, employers and trade unions have so far found few answers to the challenges of time-demanding projects. It is therefore often left to the individual to draw a line between work and leisure time and to reduce the workload of projects to a reasonable level. Project managers and their teams need to build resilience to deal with project dynamics and uncertainty. This not only helps to steer projects more calmly through stormy seas, but also to avoid personal damage in doing so (Kutsch et al., 2015).

## WHAT THE FUTURE WILL BRING

The number and importance of projects will continue to increase in the future. Not indefinitely, certainly at some point a saturation point will be reached that distinguishes temporary projects from routine. This will depend primarily on the level of development and growth of social sectors or society as a whole. Projects will become the norm, the 'new routine' in our lives. They help us to achieve challenging goals and to successfully shape ourselves and the environment in which we live. The implementation of projects becomes a core task, the effective implementation a core competence. This does not mean professionalization in the area of processes, methods and tools, but the competence to orchestrate a network of participants towards the common goal. Every citizen becomes a 'project citizen', 'project developer' or in short form 'projector', and the realization of projects becomes part of everyday life. It is about actively shaping our future, acting in a forward-looking manner, or effectively addressing societal challenges through projects. Projects are the framework for acting. They enable shared learning and growth.

This series of articles has highlighted different perspectives on what matters in making a difference. From the psychological perspective of the individual to the interaction of the stakeholders, to the impact of projects on society. Nowadays, the multitude of challenges requires that we further develop individual, organizational and societal competence in terms of the effective and sustainable implementation of projects. With this in mind, I wish you all the best and always "happy projects!"

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## About the Author



**Dr. Reinhard Wagner**

Germany



**Dr. Reinhard Wagner** has been active for more than 35 years in the field of project-related leadership, in such diverse sectors as Automotive, Engineering, and Consultancy, as well as various not-for-profit organizations. As Managing Director of Tiba Managementberatung GmbH, a leading PM Consultancy in Munich/Germany, he supports executives of industrial clients in transforming their companies towards a project-oriented, adaptive and sustainably successful organization. Reinhard Wagner has published 36 books as well as several hundred articles and blogposts in the field of project, program and project portfolio management. In more than 20 years of voluntary engagement he served the German Project Management Association (GPM) as well as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in a range of leadership roles (including President and Chairman) and was granted for his international commitment with the Honorary Fellowship of IPMA and several of IPMA's Member Associations. Reinhard is Assistant Professor at the European University Alma Mater Europaea and teaches project, program and portfolio management. He can be contacted via [reinhard.wagner@tiba.de](mailto:reinhard.wagner@tiba.de).