

Uncovering the trends in project management: Journal emphases over the last 10 years

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Abstract

The field of project management continues to develop in response to changing emphases in the management community and the demands of new project management application areas. This paper uncovers the trends of emphasis within the project management literature over the period 1994–2003, by analysing articles in the *International Journal of Project Management* and the *Project Management Journal*. Trends identified in this study are then compared to trends of emphasis identified in a variety of previous studies of changes to the field. These results are then synthesised to provide a overall impression of how the field is changing.

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1. Introduction

Project management, as a profession and area of research, continues to grow and develop. In response to project management being applied in new industries, countries and application areas, the demands on project management continue to change. These changes alter the way project management is perceived, the commonly accepted views of what it is to practice project management, and the way the field is represented in the literature.

A variety of previous studies have already examined changes to the field, using many different approaches, finding diverse and sometimes contradictory results. This study reconciles these different results and adds new findings, examining the changing development of the field, as represented by keywords identified in the last 10 years of the *International Journal of Project Management* (IJPM) and the *Project Management Journal* (PMJ). Tendencies in the literature are identified, which indicate the future direction of the profession.

2. Previous research

It is arguable whether project management is applied consistently and generically. Crawford [1] has found variation in project management knowledge and practices between industries, countries and application areas. Due to this variation in understanding and application of project management, it is useful to understand which kinds of projects dominate the literature on project management.

However, it is difficult to establish the conclusive distribution of project size or practice over industry sectors, as responses to surveys are subject to sample bias. The influence of industry bias is identified by Evaristo and van Fenema [2, p. 276], who state that "...the current knowledge based on the management of projects emanates from large capital construction projects responsible for only 10% of the projects." Betts and Lansley [3, p. 211] found that in project management "...by far the most frequently addressed industry was construction, followed by papers relating to the information and service sector and the process industries."

In a survey by Pinto and Slevin [4, p. 70], it was found that the construction industry constituted "...44% of the sample." The two main industry sectors identified in a

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study by Themistocleous and Wearne [5, p. 11] were construction (46%); and, services (30%). The two main industry sectors in a survey by Zobel and Wearne [6, p. 37] were found to be: services (41%); and construction (23%). By contrast, the influence of sample choice becomes clear when the above industry distributions are compared to research by White and Fortune [7, p. 3] which found that over 25% of respondents were from the IT industry, 8% were from engineering and 2% were construction.

Regardless of the ‘true’ breakdown of project management amongst all industry sectors, it is clear from these studies that project management practice is heavily influenced by research emanating from the construction industry. If, as Evaristo and van Fenema [2, p. 276] have found, this sector represents only a small percent of the total number of projects executed, then there is an associated risk that research conclusions may be unquestioningly and invalidly transferred between industry sectors.

In order to understand the field of project management as it currently exists, it can be useful to understand how it has changed over time. As a field, project management is regularly facing new challenges, as the tools, methods and approaches to management that comprise the discipline are applied to different areas, for different ends, in different cultures. As an “emerging profession” [8, p. 3], the field continues to grow and adapt, and can be said to have come along way from its origins in the 1950s, as academics and practitioners add new insight to the already wide range of practice options.

During the 1950s, network analysis and planning techniques, like PERT and CPM, formed the focus of development in project management. In the 1960s, these techniques continued to be popular in the construction industry, but Cost/Scheduling Control System Criteria (C/SCSC) gained popularity within the defence and aerospace industries. Developments in the field of project management in the 1960s also included the formation of two major professional associations [9].

Shenhar [10] notes a focus on teamwork as a defining feature of project management in the 1970s, while Stretton [11] notes an emphasis on breakdown structures and systems concepts. The 1980s were typified by a focus on project organisation, project risk [10], the project front end, external influences to projects, and initial work on the development of project management standards [12].

Already a wide variety of topics can be seen to have influenced the field, some of which have left a lasting impression, while others have risen and dissipated as momentary areas of enquiry. Pascale [13, p. 19] analyses changes to the general management field since World War II, and notes that the idea of the professional manager relies on premise of the relevance of generic concepts that underlie management in all situations. Managerial techniques have become a “packaged goods industry”, with the consequence that management techniques are only applied superficially or while fashionable, often only surviving for a short period. A great deal of similarity can

be seen between the forces influencing the general management and project management communities.

Many of the past management fads have had merit. While “...there are valid aspects to most of these ideas, what is wrong is the piecemeal fashion in which they are implemented...” [14, p. 17]. Because of the superficial or transitory way in which many past management ideas have been applied, there has been little chance for in-depth learning regarding their efficacy. “Not surprisingly, ideas acquired with ease are discarded with ease. Fads ebb, flow – and even change by 180 degrees” [13, p. 20]. Similar changes can be seen within the project management literature.

3. Recent changes to the profession

Change in the practice of project management does not continue at a steady pace. The rate at which new ideas are introduced to a field can be related to a variety of factors. Pascale [13, p. 18] links the consumption rate of management fads to times of sagging fortunes and managerial panic. However, the introduction of new ideas to a field can also be related to expansion into new application areas and inclusion of new practitioners, who bring new perspectives and challenge established patterns of behaviour. For instance, in 2000, Urli and Urli [15, p. 33] indicated that the “...field of project management has undergone very important developments during the last 10 years...” involving the extension of project management into new fields of practice.

Seven studies stand out as relevant to an analysis of trends in the field of project management. Betts and Lansley [3] examined the first 10 years worth of articles in *IJPM*, using a system of weighted classification, covering the years 1983–1992. Themistocleous and Wearne [5] have provided a similar study, examining the frequency of project management topics between 1984 and 1998. Their study centres on *IJPM*, with limited comparison to *PMJ*. Zobel and Wearne [6] used the same method as Themistocleous and Wearne [5] to examine topic coverage in four project management conferences between 1996 and 1998. Morris, Patel and Wearne [16] have also completed a survey of interest, documenting the review of, and possible changes to, the UK Association for Project Management’s Body of Knowledge. Morris [17] provides a portrait of contemporary project management research by examining the most popular topics in papers and book reviews from *IJPM*, *PMJ* and *PM Network* between 1990 and 1999.

Urli and Urli [15] used a “scientometric method” of text analysis to analyse changes to the field. This approach was used to identify tendencies for association of keywords in all papers identified as relevant to project management in the electronic database *ABI-INFORM*, published within the period 1987–1996. Their study is unique in that their method purportedly elicits “...the most significant themes as defined by academics themselves rather than by an a priori classification” [15, p. 34]. Kloppenborg and Opfer also

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