

Exploring the role of formal bodies of knowledge in defining a profession – The case of project management

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Abstract

Since the mid 1970s, project management associations around the world have made serious attempts to conduct themselves as professional associations. Traditional professions distinguished themselves by emphasising standards such as service to the public and competence in their field, and by ensuring that their membership meets these standards. An important element of a profession is ownership of a body of knowledge that is distinctive to the professional group. Project management associations have spent considerable time and effort in developing Bodies of Knowledge (BOKs) and their associated certification programs, and indeed the popularity of these has been notable. Yet there are problems, some relating to the broader issue of whether the project management associations really are equipped to act as professional bodies, others related to the specific challenge of agreeing the ‘distinctive body of knowledge’ and to the value of certification.

This paper draws on insights from the *rethinking project management* EPSRC project as well as several separate research programs to explore the development of project management as a profession and the role of the formal BOKs in this professionalization, and to suggest a research agenda for critiquing, contributing to, and maintaining both the formal BOKs and the more general body of knowledge relevant to the needs of the discipline.

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1. Introduction

Recently the debate about the intellectual coherence of project management has achieved fresh prominence with many arguing, on the one hand, that the discipline, if such there is, is an amalgam of many other disparate disciplines [1–3], with others proposing that, despite this diversity there are nevertheless distinctive underlying threads organised not least by the developmental, ‘unique’ nature of the project life cycle [1,4,5]. Seemingly regardless of such academically nuanced uncertainty, practitioners have, since

at least the late 1960s, appeared to be in no doubt that there is value in belonging to project management associations. The growth of the larger of such institutions has been quite phenomenal, the Project Management Institute for example having over 210,000 members as of March 2006. The primary service such associations provide was initially, and largely still is, to share information but from the 1980s and 1990s onwards they began certifying ‘project management professionals’ (in their words) as meeting a required standard of knowledge, as outlined in their official ‘Bodies of Knowledge’. The number of PMI ‘project management professionals’ in early 2006 was over 180,000 [6].

The issues this paper seeks to address are: (1) how do these associations stand as professional bodies; (2) how

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valid are their Bodies of Knowledge (BOKs) as descriptions of the relevant professional area of competence; (3) what is the significance of there being differing paradigms underlying the two or three principal BOKs in the field; (4) what is the potential role of research in contributing to these and related points?

The paper draws on the work of the *rethinking project management* EPSRC research network to suggest that: (a) currently project management is a ‘semi-profession’ or ‘commercialized profession’ [7] (b) bodies of knowledge are central to the perception of the discipline/profession, (c) the presence of differing underlying paradigms does not necessarily indicate a lack of maturity within the profession but does raise some issues of definition and application of appropriate practice, (d) project management associations should emphasize ways of developing competence other than merely following explicit knowledge guides such as formal BOKs, as traditionally have other professional bodies, and (e) although there are several different actors with vested interests in the bodies of knowledge, research has a real role in providing theoretically grounded, empirically-based evidence of the knowledge – and wider aspects of competence – needed to manage projects successfully. We conclude by identifying a research agenda that we believe is appropriate for supporting and elaborating these assertions.

2. The professions and knowledge – the case of project management

The study of professionalization, or the path to professional status, involves consideration of both what a profession looks like (the traits) and the process by which these characteristics are attained (who does what and why).

Professions have long been studied in sociology as special ways of regulating work. Originally the interest was in identifying the characteristics that distinguished professions from non-professions [8,9] – typically the occupations cited are law, medicine, the church, architecture, engineering and accounting. This ‘trait approach’ identified the fundamental characteristics of professionalization [10,11] as having:

- to meet formal educational and entry requirements,
- autonomy over the terms and conditions of practice,
- a code of ethics,
- a commitment to service ideals,
- a monopoly over a discrete body of knowledge and related skills.

Many doubt the possibility for any occupation in the contemporary context achieving the supposed autonomy and status of the traditional professions at their peak. The traits listed above reflect a model of a professionalism which is based on idealised, even romanticised, Anglo-Saxon notions of autonomy and authority which at best has applied to only a handful of occupations but which

are no longer tenable [12]. The overwhelming majority of today’s occupations achieve only some of these ideals and they have, as a consequence, been classified as ‘semi-professions’ [11,13], ‘para-professions’ or ‘emerging professions.’

Project management appears to fit into the ‘semi-profession’ or ‘emerging profession’ category [14], at least for the moment. Unlike the traditional professions, project management draws very little of its legitimacy by reference to its contribution to the public good, to an ideal of social service, or by adherence to an overarching ethical code. Some would argue therefore that project management is actually more a ‘commercialized profession’ [7,15] as its claims to exclusive expertise are indexed primarily upon technical ability, managerial competency and in particular the delivery of economic benefits by the project manager for his or her client.

Instead of comparing semi-professions to ideal traits, it might be more fruitful to observe the processes of professionalization. From this perspective, claims to professional status must be placed in historical, economic, political, and social context and are seen as being fundamentally shaped by these conditions rather than assuming that claims to professional status are objective, inevitable, and timeless [10,16]. The development of the project management associations can be seen as part of this changing landscape.

Historically, professions begin with the recognition by people that they are doing something that is not covered by other professions [17] and where they then self-organise in order to control the supply of specialised or expert labour, both to guarantee a quality of service and to enhance the status of the professional him- or herself, often with the consent and support of the state [18] (as had been the case in the guilds – but the professions differentiated themselves from the guilds by the greater emphasis on knowledge and service, with an implication of class differentiation). The formation of a professional association thus very much depended upon the articulation of a distinctive ‘competence territory’ that members could claim as their exclusive area of practise [19].

Project management has followed a similar path. Project management’s professional associations began being formed in the late 1960s/early 1970s principally to facilitate the exchange of information, largely via conferences, seminars, journals and magazines. In the mid 1970s however PMI, the US based Project Management Institute, and later APM, the UK based Association for Project Management, embarked on programs to certify that people met their standards of distinctive knowledge. This required a reference work to be used as the basis of the certification tests. PMI established the first version of its (Guide to the) Body of Knowledge in 1976, although it was first published in 1983 [20]. Various other national project management associations produced their own versions, in some cases quite different from PMI’s, over the next 10–15 years. A number of upgrades have followed since.

Clearly what we observe here are attempts by the project management professions to formulate the dimensions of the subject around which they can claim their ‘distinctive

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