

The importance of ‘process’ in Rethinking Project Management: The story of a UK Government-funded research network

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Abstract

This paper tells the story of a UK Government-funded research network called *Rethinking Project Management*, funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council between 2004 and 2006. The story is significant because of the considerable attention given to the *process* of the Network, both the *inquiry process* of ‘rethinking’ project management, and the broader *social process* in which the rethinking activity was carried out. In telling this story, the lead organisers explain how the inquiry process was organised as a *learning system* to enable the Network to ‘learn’ its way to relevant directions for future research, and secondly, how the broader social process was organised and facilitated to create a context for effective interaction between the people involved. A significant challenge in managing the research programme was how to engage the participants in purposeful inquiry, which would serve not only the primary aims of the Network, but would also yield new and interesting insights for the people involved. This paper seeks to explain how the lead organisers addressed this challenge, through a detailed and reflective discussion of how the research programme was organised and facilitated to achieve the Network’s primary aims. In summary, the principal aim in telling this story is to highlight the importance of *process* in collaborative research activity involving academics and practitioners, in order that other researchers might draw on the experience of this Network.

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1. Introduction

This paper tells the story of a UK Government-funded research network called *Rethinking Project Management*, funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), as part of a scheme of networks aimed at creating new interdisciplinary research communities and new research topics in developing fields. Shaped by the general aims of EPSRC networks, the stated aims of the *Rethinking Project Management* Network were:

1. To create a new interdisciplinary network of academics, researchers and practitioners interested in developing the field of project management and improving real-world practice.
2. To define an interdisciplinary research agenda aimed at enriching and extending the field beyond its current foundations.

To briefly summarise the Network, a comprehensive programme of meetings was organised between 2004 and 2006, involving many leading academics in project management, and a number of senior practitioners from industry – see [Table 1](#). Each meeting was carefully planned, and the main substantive meetings were closely aligned with the interests and perspectives of the participants, focusing on seven core areas of concern – *projectification, managing*

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Table 1

Rethinking Project Management (EPSRC Network 2004-2006) Summary of the Network Research Programme			
Network Title	Rethinking Project Management: Developing a New Research Agenda		
Funding Body	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)		
Grant Period	24 months	Start Date March 2004	End Date February 2006
Network Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To create a new inter-disciplinary network of academics, researchers and practitioners interested in developing the field of project management and improving real-world practice. To define an inter-disciplinary research agenda aimed at enriching and extending the field beyond its current foundations. 		
Academics & Disciplines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academics from fifteen UK universities covering both business and engineering schools, and a number of overseas academics from Canada, Europe, Australia and the US. Disciplines: project management, operations management, management science, operational research, information systems, business strategy, new product development and innovation, organisational behaviour, critical management, social theory, and complexity theory. 		
Industry Participants <i>(including presenters)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior practitioners from private, public and voluntary sector organisations including: Rolls-Royce Plc, Human Systems Ltd, the Big Food Group, Warburtons, Daresbury Laboratories, FAME National Project (ODPM), Newcastle-Gateshead Initiative, Office for Government Commerce (UK Government), GlaxoSmithKline, UK Ministry of Defence, Sharefirst/South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), Airbus, High-Point Rendell, Halcrow, Royal Liver Assurance, and the National School of Government (UK Civil Service). Representatives from the Association for Project Management (APM), the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Major Projects Association (MPA) and the International Project Management Association (IPMA). 		
PROGRAMME			
	Date	Location	Areas of Concern
Meeting 1	30 th -31 st March 2004	Manchester	Shaping and Planning the Network
Meeting 2	15 th July 2004	London	Emerging Themes and New Perspectives
Meeting 3	20 th -21 st October 2004	Newcastle	Projects Across Sectors (Business Projects)
Meeting 4	27 th -28 th January 2005	London	Projectification and Managing Multiple Projects
Meeting 5	26 th -27 th May 2005	Strathclyde	Actuality of Projects and Uncertainty
Meeting 6	21 st -22 nd September 05	Bath	Profession and Practitioner Development
Meeting 7	24 th -25 th January 2006	Manchester	Directions, Messages and Network Review
Primary Research Output	A Special Issue of the <i>International Journal of Project Management</i> containing a set of papers on areas for future research in the management of projects. The first paper [1] presents the Network's main findings on the need for new research in the following areas: project complexity, social process, value creation, conceptualisation, and practitioner development.		
Industry Outputs	A report on the more immediate implications of this work is planned for practitioners, together with a seminar programme for different industry groups. According to the EPSRC, the objective of these networks is not simply to define new research topics, but to also " <i>facilitate the transfer of knowledge to a broader community</i> " (www.epsrc.ac.uk).		
Website	www.rethinkingpm.org.uk		

multiple projects, actuality of projects, dealing with uncertainty, managing business projects, the profession and practitioner development – see meetings 3–6 in Table 1. It was also decided that seven meetings would not be sufficient to develop the research agenda output of the Network, and that significant between-meeting activity would also

be needed. Consequently, a considerable amount of activity was carried out between the meetings, resulting in a series of working papers covering the perceived issues and themes arising from each meeting. And finally, as Table 1 shows, the primary research output to emerge from this Network has been the collection of papers presented in this

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