

Perspectives on project management

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Abstract

This paper addresses perspectives underlying the project management literature. Content analysis of selected textbooks and formal articles revealed that this literature is primarily based on a few perspectives, and that the perspectives emphasized have changed over time. Today the leadership perspective is the dominant one, while the task perspective earlier was the most emphasized. The study also revealed growing application of the leadership and business perspectives.

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1. Introduction

When a field or discipline grows and matures this often results in plurality and differentiation, but also in fragmentation. This is also the situation for the discipline of project management [1]. One main reason for the plurality and ambiguity is that project management involves many theories, implying that a characteristic feature of project work is the need to master various combinations of disciplines. This may create a situation where authors and practitioners base their approaches to project challenges on different combinations of theories and methods. Another related reason is that the different actors look at project execution from different perspectives, implying differences in understanding, interests, expectations, and ambitions related to the project. Differences in perspective may also lead to various conclusions as to what project execution is about and create problems for benchmarking between

projects. For students and practitioners, the differences in applied perspectives give rise to various questions, e.g., why do some authors focus on one type of problem while others ignore it? Why do some actors focus on systems and others on processes? Why do some emphasise a mechanistic structure and strong control while others focus on organic structure, organisational culture and processes? Such questions may easily lead to controversy and confusion among students and practitioners in their effort to utilize the literature on project work. To answer such questions the various perspectives must be examined more closely, including their underlying assumptions and focuses [2]. This is important in order to answer the following question that is the background for this article: *Which perspectives do today's authors mostly use in the field of project management?*

The remaining part of the article is organized as follows: In the next section, we will clarify the term “perspective”. Then, we will introduce six perspectives that are applied in the project management literature. Then, follows a section where we will describe the research method and data collection. In the next section, we will analyse the data and test the hypotheses. Finally, we will draw conclusions and highlight the implications of our findings.

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2. Six project perspectives

The term “perspective” stems from the philosophy of perspectivism, implying that what we perceive depends on the angle it is observed from. Stated differently, perspectives are similar to “mental models”, they emphasize some aspects and leave others out. Scott argues that perspectives on organizational issues should be understood in two senses [2]. They are historical products, ideas and practice developed in specific contexts, implying that to discover them from outside their context will be difficult. Perspectives are not only of historical interest, they have been invented and reinvented into identifiable analytic models [2]. It should also be noted that models or perspectives by definition involve simplifications, allowing for an emphasis on key aspects and relationships.

Important questions for this research are: Is it possible, and how do we identify the perspectives that writers apply on projects and the key aspects underlying the various perspectives? In our view this can be done by identifying some key factors, i.e. which issues they talk about when applying a specific perspective, the theoretical basis for the perspective, and the methods used [2]. In this paper, we will label these groups of factors “focus areas”.

Through literature surveys and many years of practice we have observed several perspectives applied to project management. In the following we will present six perspectives that are reflected in the project management literature:

- *The task perspective* – The focus of the task perspective is on the project object that should be delivered as specified, within budget and on time. Key issues include project scope of work, project targets, project results, and planning and control. A dominant theory that this perspective is based on is Taylor’s Scientific Management. Another theoretical basis is the idea of rational choice indicating that the project work should be based on rationality. Planning and control methods have a central position in this perspective, e.g., WBS, PERT, CPM, and cost estimation techniques [3–6].
- *The leadership perspective* – This perspective focuses on the leadership aspect of project management and human processes. Key issues are leadership, communication, uncertainty, and learning. This perspective is based on theories of leadership, communication, process, organizational change, and team organization. Methods and tools reflecting this perspective include leadership-related methods, team-based organization, communication plans, responsibility matrixes, milestone planning, evaluation and feedback, and decisions [7,8].
- *The system perspectives* – This perspective implies that problems should be solved by considering the total picture rather than individual components. The project is viewed as a management system including several subsystems, e.g., control system, production system, information system and evaluation system. Key issues are systems, element of systems, boundaries, and dynamics. The system theory dominates this perspective. Another relevant theory is the concept of a natural system. System models, mapping, and simulation are important tools used within this perspective [8–10].
- *The stakeholder perspective* – In this perspective, effective management of the relationship between the project and its stakeholders is important for project success. Key issues include stakeholders, communication, negotiation, relationships, influence and dependence. The agency theory is dominant in this perspective, as well as the theory of power and resource. In addition, the industrial network theory that focuses on how a network affects the actors involved and their relationships is highly relevant. The stakeholder analysis is a commonly used approach in this perspective. Analysis of stakeholder strategies and stakeholder communication plans are also important [11–15].
- *The transaction cost perspective* – This perspective is based on the assumption that a project can be considered an economic transaction. Transaction, transaction costs, production costs, and governance structure are key issues in this perspective. Other theories influencing this perspective are the incentive theory, contract theory and the theory of innovation. The most used methods and tools within this perspective are contract development, contract negotiations, contract execution incentives and innovation processes [1,16–18].
- *The business by project perspective* – This is a perspective that focuses on project investments and benefits. The basic idea is that the company’s business is conducted through projects. Key issues include business, project results, project success, strategy, profit and benefits. An important theory is the strategy theory. Other theories that this perspective are based on include the financial theory, the investment theory, the portfolio theory and the marketing theory. Significant methods applied in this perspective are the payback method, the net present value method, the return on investment method, the strategic analysis, the excellence models, and the business case [3,19,20].

Table 1 summarizes the above characteristic factors of the various perspectives.

Table 1 should be read as follows: The left column refers to the six perspectives identified. The next three columns contain what we consider to be the key factors related to the three main focus areas. The first column contains the key factors related to the issues in focus per perspective. The next column highlights the underlying theories per perspective. Finally, in the right hand column we have summarized the key methods per perspective.

Above we have addressed six perspectives. There might be more. However, in spite of the conglomerate of applied concepts and approaches, we do not believe that the number of applied perspectives is infinite. A brief literature sur-

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