

# Project management of unexpected events

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## Abstract

Unexpected events and environmental impact not planned for are common during project implementation. This article explores how unexpected events are dealt with in projects using qualitative case study data from four different cases. Results show four different approaches to deal with unexpected events: innovative action, applying detachment strategies, setting up intensive meeting schedules and negotiating project conditions are common approaches to deal with the unexpected events. The discussion shed new light on one common situations during project execution – i.e. dealing with unexpected events – that is not normally included in the best practice models of project management.

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## 1. Introduction

Project management practices are often, in the text book version and from the project manager's viewpoint, conceived of as “executing the plan” as efficient as possible while avoiding difficulties and deviations. As a consequence, dealing with the project environment is also a part of the execution assignment and included in the plan. First, environment is taken care of at scheduled points in time, for example, at initiation, stage-gate review occasions and at termination. Such events are part of the project model used and points in time where the project is open for external impact. Second, risk management procedures are in place to mitigate consequences of, among other things, outside disturbances that may have a negative impact on the project.

Environmental issues are thus turned into planned events or are being subject for risk assessment. The unpredictability and randomness of project environments are kept aside and project management are mostly concerned with internal issues. Consequently, project management models cannot be accused of being “black box” models.

On the contrary, project management models fully illuminate the project itself while leaving the environment somewhat hidden in darkness [1].

However, investigating the relations between project execution and the project environment is being an increasingly more interesting issue for at least three reasons. First, many projects are organized in networks having several partners [2,3] thus being dependent on several host organizations and somewhat different goals. Second, organizations are more frequently referred to as being project-based or project dependent [4–7] with projects as a vital part of the organizational architecture. These two observations (project networks and organizations being project based) also indicate that projects are frequently and regularly organized by a large number of organizations. Environment is also becoming a more emphasized topic when moving from major one-off projects to frequent and regular project operations. It is also recognized in traditional PM literature that environmental relations need management attention but as the relation become more complex it is also becoming less possible to foresee and less possible to plan. This is also made a topic of research to a greater extent today than what used to be the case [8–13] as well as suggested, in the literature reviews, as a desired topic to investigate more thoroughly [14].

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This paper aims at contributing to the stream of the literature inquiring into the links between a project and its environment. More precisely, we aim at an outline of different categories of unexpected events appearing in projects as a consequence of environmental impact and how these are dealt with.

### 1.1. Between plans and unexpected events

Traditional and normative project management models, such as the various bodies of knowledge presently on the market, are highly rational and sequential in the approach to project management issues, built on the idea of major independent projects being the role model, heavily dependent on structure, administrative systems and the execution of plans. Several text books also discuss project management along similar lines (there are many, see e.g. [15,16]). It is a theory for the “best of worlds” with order and control as key words [17].

Such models are first of all prescriptions guiding ambitions and rational aspirations in the field rather than they are valid descriptions on project management in practice. The issue on the relation between espoused theories (what is supposed to be done) of projects and the actual project practice, or theory-in-use [18] has been the topic of some recent research efforts [19,20,10]. Research on the practice of projects follows similar lines as a more major shift in social science research, popularly referred to as the *practice turn* [21]. The idea is to “bring work back”, using the words of Barley and Kunda [22], in order to make research more relevant and based on what is really going on in organizations. Several research agendas have been formulated following basically similar arguments, such as the communities of practice approach [23], learning and knowledge [24], strategy as practice [25,26] and the so called ANT approach.

Approaching projects from a practice perspective indicates the necessity to highlight actual activities, processes and actions of those that execute projects. Thus, models of project management become secondary and are not made a starting point for research. However, project management bodies of knowledge may well be something used by practitioners to legitimate their actions or as guides for action – but it is not a starting point for building the ontology of the research. Actually, to detach research on projects from ontological constraints provided by best practice project management models is rewarding as it opens up for a more comprehensive and elaborate understanding of the organizational and behavioural aspects of projects. This is true also for organizational studies in general, see for example [27].

The issue on project – environment relations is one of the aspects of project management practices that have been shielded behind rational models and planning approaches, thus not giving the complexity of project – environment practices the attention it deserves. As indicated in the introduction, project environments are depicted in terms of

stakeholder relations, risk assessment, program and portfolio contingencies, and stage-gate decision points but less interest is given the everyday struggle to keep projects on track and on schedule, and not much is conveyed in terms of how the unexpected [28,29] is dealt with.

Engwall [8] provides an important contribution, highlighting how parallel activities in the organizational context, experiences and pre-project processes, institutional forces and future aspirations come together in creating the project context. He is able to extend the view of projects by adding time (before and after) and space (organizational context) to the understanding of a focal project. The analysis shows that time frames as well as contextual frames are important for the understanding of project execution and success or failure.

When projects are put into context, as in Engwall’s article, it is obvious that it is not possible to assess all possible environmental impacts that may occur over the project life cycle. Still plans have to be made. Plans codify those expectations that are desirable, necessary and likely if actions are carried out in a correct way without any unexpected disturbances. Project plans are repositories of expectations on which managers build their daily activities and hence there is a logical chain where our expectations about the future guide our actions today. Expectations also help direct our attention and guide us in determining what to look for to confirm that our expectations were correct or incorrect. A complication is that people normally tend to seek positive confirmation and may neglect disconfirming information [30]. Unexpected events may thus not be detected early on. March [31] concludes that ambiguity is not only connected to the future. Also the past may be ambiguous with several possible interpretations and possible consequences. Learning is as complicated as planning.

Planning/expecting, executing/acting, learning and experiencing are tightly connected in the mindset of project members and managers. A project is to some extent truly ambiguous and filled with unexpected events created as things do not unfold as planned or because conditions change over time. Projects are still being successfully carried out and we praise the amazing project managers that seem to be able to cope with changes all the time. They seem to exercise the art of “managing the unexpected” parallel to executing the plan.

Based on the research agendas presented by Engwall and Weick and Sutcliffe, we aim at an investigation of how unexpected events are managed and we are looking more carefully on such events where the link between the project and the environment is established and attended to by managers.

### 1.2. Research approach and case overview

The research is built on case studies. Cases were chosen to depict different organizational and industrial contexts but with the common focus on projects as a main organizational form for developing and delivering products and ser-

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