



Improving and embedding project management practice in organisations — A qualitative study

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Received 16 September 2014; received in revised form 7 January 2015; accepted 15 January 2015

Available online 26 February 2015

Abstract

This paper describes the results of a qualitative study to develop a framework to help organisations to embed useful project management improvement initiatives (PMIIs), which specifically aimed to identify key PMIIs and key embedding factors, based upon the circumstances encountered in different organisations. While the literature on PM provides some advice about PMIIs, understanding how to facilitate their embedment appears to be limited. However, research reported in the innovation literature provides a useful preliminary set of salient factors. A first attempt at framework conceptualisation based on a literature review was used as a starting point for exploratory empirical research. A series of thirty semi-structured interviews with PM professionals sought to identify additional PMIIs and embedding factors and check its salience. Analysis of the interviews data led to a framework comprising key 15 PMIIs and 26 key embedding factors, grouped into four improving themes and six embedding themes.

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Keywords: Improving; Embedding; Project management practice

1. Introduction

In the past thirty years project management (PM) has developed substantially as a discipline and significantly increased in visibility and importance (Kwak and Anbari, 2009; Mir and Pinnington, 2014; Zhai et al., 2009). Business is becoming increasingly ‘projectised’ or project oriented (Martinsuo et al., 2006), and ‘management by projects’ has become a powerful way to integrate organisational functions and motivate groups to achieve higher levels of performance and productivity (Morris, 1997). Nevertheless, achieving effective PM remains a challenge.

The Standish Group International (2009) found that, in the year 2008, only 32% of all the projects surveyed succeeded (i.e. were delivered on time, on budget, with the required features

and functions); 44% were challenged (late, over budget and/or with less than the required features and functions) and 24% of projects failed (cancelled prior to completion or delivered and never used). These results highlight the importance of improving PM practice in organisations. Geraldi et al. (2008) raised the question of *how to better develop and apply the knowledge of PM in projects*. Cooke-Davies (2001) has studied a similar research question “*What can be done to improve PM practices, and thus project performance?*” As argued by Shi (2011), how to implement and improve PM in the ‘right way’ remains a relevant research topic.

There are a large number of ways in which organisations can improve PM practice (Thomas and Mullaly, 2008). For example, the implementation of PM methodologies varies considerably, from very ad hoc and informal approaches, to methodologies that are formally defined and consistently adhered to. Different strategies are employed for training and employee development, namely through the implementation of PM career paths or PM certification systems. There are different approaches adopted in introducing project support

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groups (such as PM offices), and these support groups differ in focus, structure and influence (Hobbs et al., 2008).

In an attempt to indicate a “best” path to improve PM, Shi (2011) has proposed a Value Adding Path Map (VAPM) approach directing an organisation step by step to introduce and implement PM in a better way. Shi (2011) argues that it is the coordination of the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ PM system implementations that creates the largest value to an organisation with the least investment. The ‘hard’ PM system means the traditional ways of PM implementation, which includes the PM process, PM training and knowledge management and PM tools and techniques. The ‘soft’ PM system includes general management systems and ‘PM culture’. While Shi’s study makes a recommendation of the “best” path to implement PM, the idea that effective PM practice can vary from one organisational context to another is widely accepted (Besner and Hobbs, 2013; Cooke-Davies et al., 2009; Thomas and Mullaly, 2008).

For example, organisations might use PM maturity models (Project Management Institute, 2013; Sowden et al., 2010), to understand the current capability to undertake PM, and to help them to improve PM practice in a structured way (Sowden et al., 2010). Unfortunately, no one model has achieved general acceptance, and from a practical perspective maturity models have a large number of indicators which make it hard to direct an organisation to improve PM practice (Shi, 2011). Therefore, while the literature on PM provides some advice, organisations need guidance on which key project management improvement initiatives (PMIIs) they should concentrate their efforts (Shi, 2011; Thomas and Mullaly, 2008).

In this research study, PMIIs include not just specific tools and techniques, or enhancements of tools and techniques, but also processes, set of behaviours, routines, and ways of working, that are directed at improving project management performance.

Surprisingly, the PM literature seems to have given little attention to the problem of embedding PMIIs in organisations, tending to focus on what to improve and not so much on how to establish and maintain the improvements.

The concept of embedding appears to be discussed mainly in knowledge management literature. Argote et al. (2003) argue that the process of embedding of knowledge is one of the most fundamental areas in knowledge management and organisational learning research. Knowledge is said to be embedded, when it is deeply transferred or integrated into people’s interpretive frameworks, routines and work practices (Crane and Yoong, 2009). However, Crane and Yoong (2009, p 259) have argued that “the nature of the knowledge embedding process is not well understood at either the organisational or the individual level. In the research literature there is neither clarity about how embedding occurs, nor a good understanding of how it can be facilitated”.

Different perspectives to address the problem of embedding PM practice could be employed, such as knowledge management, organisational learning, and change management. However, typical concepts in these perspectives do not seem to provide sufficient practical guidance to PM professionals in embedding PMIIs. However, the research literature on innovation literature

offers potentially relevant insights employing concepts of diffusion, dissemination, implementation and routinisation, particularly from the areas of information and technology and health care services (Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Venkatesh and Bala, 2008). Therefore, to explore embedment of a PMII in organisations, the research reported here conceptualises PMIIs as innovations in order to develop an understanding of the process of embedding PMIIs.

This research interprets several key concepts as follows:

- *Diffusion* is considered as the passive spread of innovations (i.e. a passive phenomenon of social influence).
- *Dissemination* involves active and planned efforts to convince target groups to adopt an innovation.
- *Implementation* of an innovation is here viewed as active and planned efforts to mainstream the innovation within an organisation.
- *Routinisation* is seen as the institutionalisation of an innovation and its standard use within an organisation (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

Therefore, embedding PMIIs is studied as a process rather than an event, with PMII embeddedness into the organisation as the result (i.e. adopted by all relevant individuals and incorporated into “business as usual”).

Van de Ven et al. (1999) argue that at the organisational level, the move from considering an innovation to successfully routinizing it is generally a nonlinear process characterised by multiple shocks, setbacks, and unanticipated events. The various influences that help the innovation spread through the organisation can be thought of as lying on a continuum between pure diffusion and active dissemination (Greenhalgh et al., 2004). In this study the diffusion and dissemination of PMIIs is regarded as a process of ‘communication and influence’ for the adoption decision of the PMII by the organisation. The characteristics of an innovation (PMII) and the individual adopters have particular influence in this process (Rogers, 2003). As argued by Greenhalgh et al. (2004, p 598) “people are not passive recipients of innovations. Rather (and to a greater or lesser extent in different persons), they seek innovations, experiment with them, evaluate them, find (or fail to find) meaning in them, develop feelings (positive or negative) about them, challenge them, worry about them, complain about them, “work around” them, gain experience with them, modify them to fit particular tasks, and try to improve or redesign them—often through dialogue with other users”.

Implementation is the efforts made to introduce the use of a PMII in the organisation. As argued by Meyers et al. (1999, p 295) implementation is “the early usage activities that often follow the adoption decision”. The PMII implementation and routinisation success are dependent on the organisation context (e.g. Cooke-Davies et al., 2009). Different organisations provide widely differing contexts for innovations, and some features of organisations (both structural and “cultural”) have been shown to influence the likelihood that an innovation will be successfully embedded (Nystrom et al., 2002; Sharma and Rai, 2003). Additionally, external influences can also have

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