Rethinking IT project management: Evidence of a new mindset and its implications

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the rethinking project management agenda in relation to the information technology (IT) sector. Our analysis of the evolution of thinking and practice among leading IT project managers across four countries elicits nine principles and four personal qualities that constitute the core of a mindset that facilitates rethinking the practice of IT project management. We compare this with the Rethinking Project Management research agenda [Winter M, Smith C, Morris P, Cicmil S. Directions for future research in Project management: the main findings of a UK government-funded research network. Int J Project Manage 2006;24(8):638-649.]. Our contribution is to (1) validate the directions defined in that agenda; (2) identify elements not incorporated in it and (3) provide examples that crystallise the agenda for the domain of IT project management.
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1. Introduction[1]

A recent study, called Rethinking Project Management [1–5] has highlighted the need for a fundamental re-appraisal of project management research. The study identified five directions for advancing research and was based on collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners. The five directions identified were: complexity, social process, value creation, broader conceptualisation of projects, and reflective practice. Each direction can be seen as enhancing conventional wisdom. Taken as a whole, they amount to a substantial, even radical, re-statement of the nature of projects and project management. While academics and practitioners alike may accept the appropriateness of each new direction *intellectually*, we need to articulate what this means to the project manager *in practice*. From the perspective of a project manager, there is the question of what kind of person would they need to be to embrace all five directions and attempt to integrate them into a coherent management approach. In short, we need to understand the mindset that will drive project managers to advance practice in the ways implied by the Rethinking Project Management (RPM) agenda.

Concurrently with the RPM research, we investigated how information technology (IT) project management has been changing and why. We interviewed more than 50 thought-leading practitioners across three continents. The IT sector was chosen because there has been such pressure for improvement that it was reasonable to expect to find evidence of innovation in practice [6,7]. Our focus was on identifiable changes to project management. In conversations with us, our interviewees provided data that offer insight into how they themselves are rethinking

project management. We distil what they told us into key principles and qualities of an emerging new mindset and compare it with the results from the RPM research.

The RPM researchers suggest that the agenda they have published is not definitive and may be refined, elaborated, supplemented or challenged. The contribution of this article to the emerging research agenda is to:

1. Validate the directions defined in their agenda from our research in the IT sector.
2. Advance the agenda by identifying elements not obviously incorporated in the five directions.
3. Provide concrete examples that help to crystallise the agenda for one important project management domain – IT.

In positioning our findings in terms of a mindset, the article's contribution to practice is to:

1. Show how project managers have to think if they are to adopt an expanded and more sophisticated view of project management.

In Section 2, we justify our use of the five directions of the RPM framework as a basis for structuring our findings. We also describe research findings that support our view that IT is an important sector to examine both in its own right and as a lead indicator for other sectors. In Section 3, we describe our research and show that it is appropriate to analyse it in terms of a new mindset. Then, in Section 4, we describe our results as a set of principles of the new mindset and show that they support the RPM framework. We condense these principles into four personal qualities that help practitioners rethink IT project management. We propose two further directions for the RPM research agenda. Finally, we identify practical applications of our understanding of the new mindset.

2. Background

This section provides background in terms of relevant research and clarifications of terminology. We use the Rethinking Project Management research as a framework by which to structure our findings about IT project management. We discuss the notion of mindset. We clarify what we mean by IT project management and describe prior research findings that motivate our targeting the IT sector.

2.1. Rethinking Project Management as a framework for analysis

The conclusions of RPM can be summarised in terms of a set of directions for research [1]. They are positioned as representing aspirations for future development of knowledge and practice. However, since they are drawn from collaborations between academics and practitioners, they can be interpreted as early indications of how thinking and practice are actually developing. Individually and taken together, these directions represent a more expansive understanding of project management. They represent an addition to the conventional wisdom of an action-based perspective on project management characterised by PMBOK. Fig. 1 summarises the new directions suggested by the RPM project. It depicts projects as an economic (value-focused) and social process as well as an action process. It shows the space of project management as being open to broader conceptualisation. It depicts *complexity* as a characteristic that spans both the project's structure and processes and its environment.

Rethinking Project Management starts with a new appreciation of the *complexity* of projects. It moves us beyond the use of the lifecycle as the only correct way of viewing projects. It takes us toward a more pluralistic approach that values multiple ways of constructing and interpreting what projects are about, what is going on within them, and what techniques and approaches may be appropriate for managing them.

An appreciation of projects as *social processes* takes us beyond the view of project processes as solely instrumental. Projects are not usefully viewed as the deterministic playing out of physical laws but are better seen as involving autonomous human actions based on various human, organisational and institutional interests that help harness our ability to combine socially to achieve more in a group structure, such as a project, than on our own.

Focus on *value creation* marks a shift away from the focus on product creation as the end goal; now the goal is organisational benefit. Focus on value creation does not imply that the project manager should be expected to go as far as to harvest the value. Rather, project management should be carried out in the light of the value-creating purposes for which the project was originally conceived or which become apparent over time.

The move to a *broader conceptualisation* of projects is in part a consequence of the recognition that projects are socially constructed. This enables researchers and practitioners to flex the boundaries within which stakeholder and
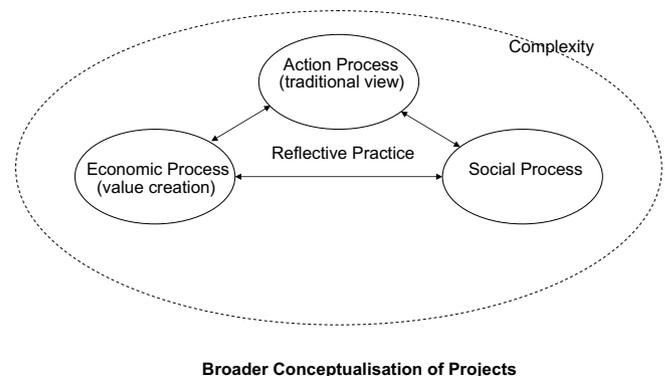

Broader Conceptualisation of Projects

Fig. 1. Combining rethinking project management research directions with the traditional approach to projects.