

Guest editorial

Special Issue on rethinking project management (EPSRC network 2004–2006)

In memory of Dr. Ralph Levene 1942–2006

1. Rethinking

Rethinking Project Management is timely. There is immense interest in the subject and some real challenges for both academics and practitioners which current approaches appear ill-equipped to deal with. The opportunity for rethinking removes the possibility that (to paraphrase Bertrand Russell) we, “*go through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of this age or nation, and from convictions which have grown up in our minds without the co-operation or consent of deliberate reason. [Without rethinking] the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected*”.¹ It is clear that until recently, the ubiquity of projects has resulted in their being treated as something definite and obvious, with solutions to challenges and complexities justified as self-evident. It is a clear duty of academics in any field to challenge such ‘common objects’ to ‘rouse the necessary questions’ and consider ‘unfamiliar possibilities’.

2. The Network

The origins of the group that led to the formation of this research network date back to 2001 with meetings at Bath and Cranfield of an ad-hoc group of UK academics to identify common areas of interest and potential areas for future work. It was the first time that many of us had met some of the ‘names on the papers and books’, and showed that the PM academic community (in the UK at least) was a diverse and at that time, highly dispersed group of people. Some common interests existed though, not least the desire to see the whole area move forward and a willingness to engage in questioning mainstream

project management ideas. Following this, in 2003 the Centre for Research in the Management of Projects (UMIST²/UCL) submitted a network bid to the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) to fund the development of a research agenda aimed at developing the field beyond its current conceptual foundations. The bid was successful and the research programme operated between March 2004 and January 2006, under the leadership of Dr Mark Winter from the University of Manchester.

The Network has been very beneficial at a number of levels. Firstly, there is the primary output – a research agenda that is presented in outline in the first paper in this Special Issue, and then in detail in papers 3–8. Secondly, there have been several important benefits in the process – not least the development of a network of people who are now drawing on each others’ knowledge and perspectives, and working on new collaborative research projects. Another significant benefit has been the impact on many of the participants’ teaching and research, through exposure to new perspectives and new areas of knowledge beyond the mainstream literature on project management. For example, a common experience in the workshops has been the finding that there is considerable value in a diversity of lenses being applied to the actuality of what are termed ‘projects’. One particular case in point is a project that was presented to a Network meeting. It was analysed from various perspectives, including viewing it in terms of the managerial power and political issues present, as a business process, and as the interactions of actors and networks. One insight we all missed though came from a soft systems analysis of the project. This analysis revealed nothing less than *fraud* being a plausible explanation for the whole project.

The value of the Network reflects the level of energy that was always present at the Network meetings – sustained by some key individuals and a well organised process. In addition, this SI is the main output of a formal programme that

¹ Extracted from *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell (in *Philosophy: Basic Readings*, ed. Warburton, N. (1999), Routledge.

² Now part of the University of Manchester.

finished in January 2006. To have this published in such a short time was a stated objective at the outset – this must be timely (who says academics never deliver anything quickly...). This is entirely attributable to the willingness of the authors and reviewers to engage in this process.

3. This Special Issue

The objective of this Special Issue is to capture the essence of these Network discussions (see www.rethinkingpm.org.uk) to codify the current state of the themes identified and then provide a research agenda for each theme. This should be seen as mirroring a new product development process. At the outset of developing a new product, it is not unusual for some basic research to be undertaken. This is not commercial in itself, but provides a foundation for the development that follows. The work here is comparable to such basic research and is of great importance not only to the academic community in shaping a research agenda for the future, but also to the practitioner community in providing the basis for the next generation of ideas that will begin to tackle some of the challenges faced.

And so to the papers. The first paper is a summary of the Network's main findings – a framework of five directions identified by the Network for, as they put it, 'developing the area intellectually'. These areas are project complexity, social process, value creation, conceptualisation and practitioner development. Each of these has an impact on the themes that were identified as being key: projectification, programmes, the actuality of projects, uncertainty, business projects, professionalisation and practitioner development.

The second paper describes the whole 'rethinking' process and provides some insightful reflections from key actors in this process. This is of importance to researchers not only in this field, but in other fields concerned with engaging in such a rethink. Methodologically, the process has worked incredibly well, though the authors are overly-modest about the high level of scholarly, organisational and facilitative effort that was needed to direct and sustain the process. It is significant as it provides the first documented cases in Project Management of the co-production of knowledge with academics, practitioners and consultants working together.

The rest of the papers relate to the 7 thematic areas identified by the Network. Paper 3 combines the two themes of projectification and programmes. In considering projectification, it discusses the role that projectification has taken in the organisation of work since the term was coined in Midler's 1995 article.³ Projectification is not without its critics however, and its onward march needs careful evaluation, not least because of the incredible diversity of human

endeavours that are being labelled as projects. During the Network discussions, it became clear that not only has projectification continued since 1995, but that organisations are using programmes and portfolios of programmes as a means of 'managing'. This, the authors have termed 'programmification' and have put this as an organisational phenomenon on the research agenda.

Paper 4 concerns the actuality of projects. This is fundamental for researchers and those involved in management development. Unless we understand the reality of the environment well, there is little chance that approaches to assist managers in dealing with this actuality will be effective. Consistent with the opening quotation, PM has many beliefs that have grown-up seemingly without the direct intervention of deliberate reasoning. Project tool-sets that are treated as self-evident and limited perspectives standing as complete truths should be re-thought. This paper provides a map for moving research forward towards better understanding the realities of the project environment.

Paper 5 describes a variety of approaches to another fundamental aspect of projects – the uncertainty of the future. Current approaches are shown to be deficient in both recognising and managing fundamental uncertainties, and, taking up some of the themes from the previous paper, that these approaches need to recognise the social nature of projects and the existence of many 'soft projects' – a recognition of a departure from the deterministic engineering-based models of the past.

Paper 6 continues to broaden the scope of PM, by considering that modern projects are increasingly about value creation, organisational change, the provision of business solutions and long-term benefits. The implication of this is that considering projects just in terms of the delivery of a single product is no longer appropriate. This broader vision incorporates elements of service delivery, organisational change, organisational strategy and operational processes.

Paper 7 considers the role of the professional associations in PM. These are large and influential organisations who through their bodies of knowledge and certification programmes, have contributed significantly to the dominant paradigm of PM. An unfortunate by-product of this is the closing down of the subject, a limiting of the scope of discussion and input from research both directly in PM and other management and social science disciplines more generally. Consistent with the themes of the other papers, the authors use a broader conceptualisation of projects than previously used, and provide a research agenda on this basis. It will be interesting to see whether this does provide a challenge to the professional associations.

Continuing with the theme of the impact of the work of the Network on practice in general, the final paper considers the implications for practitioner development. Over recent years, a significant industry has built up around developing practitioners, both through education and training. Given the broader conceptualisation of projects expressed in the previous papers, what are the implica-

³ Midler, C. (1995), "Projectification" of the Firm: the Renault Case", *Scandinavian Management Journal*, vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 363–375.

tions now for training and development, and specifically, how should such a change be reflected? There is always the option to do nothing and make no change, though this would perpetuate approaches that have been questioned consistently, not least in this paper and this Special Issue more generally. Instead, the authors demonstrate that there are already in place some responses to the change, encouraging critical discourse at a number of levels. In addition to the benefits that the authors show, this has great potential to contribute to the ground-up development of the subject area, as practitioners are engaged with academics in the production of new knowledge. This has to be a good thing.

4. Conclusion

So, what have we rethought? PM has been dominated by a number of paradigms – practices dominated by the professional bodies of knowledge, and an intellectual base challenged by the knowledge creation processes that generated it. The rethink has produced an agenda – and as such presents an exciting opportunity across all of the 5 directions and 7 themes discussed here for the academic community. In my view, it parallels that presented to the operations management community during the late 1980s and early 1990s, where practical needs to improve performance engaged an academic community. In doing so, the practical and intellectual relevance of the subject was established and operations management became a corner-stone of modern business consideration, drawing from and linking into almost all management disciplines in the process. As a community of academics, we need to continue to ask the questions and test unfamiliar possibilities. These hold the opportunities for the development of both the knowledge base and its contribution to both the taught subject and practice.

In Memoriam

It is with great sadness that the PM community learned of the death of Dr Ralph Levene on 7th August, 2006. Ralph had been part of the Network that this SI reports on, and a great supporter of its aims. He also contributed both to the writing of paper 6 and to the reviewing of one other, despite his poor health at the time. His experience, enthusiasm, knowledge and sense of humour will be missed by us all in the Network. His work was enormously impor-

tant in his life and he has enthused, amused and made us think – whether we were colleagues, readers of his writings or students in his classes. This Special Issue is dedicated to his memory as a small tribute to that work.

Ralph joined the Cranfield School of Management in April 1992 as Head of the Project Management Group. He was appointed as Director of the MSc in Project Management and Academic Leader of six faculty members. During his time at Cranfield School of Management he established an excellent reputation as a lecturer, researcher and consultant to global businesses on executive development. His expertise and interpersonal style will sorely be missed by his colleagues and the School.

Business projects (as discussed in Paper 6) were clearly an interest, though he could equally have provided commentary on projects as art, or as a game of football (a Leyton Orient game, naturally). The tributes from colleagues around the world have been most touching – all explicit in their having enjoyed working with Ralph in one of his many incarnations – as consultant, lecturer or colleague. Our condolences go to his wife, Tricia and his family. May he rest in peace.

Acknowledgements

Dr Mark Winter who ‘herded the feral cats’ (as the members of the network became referred to) masterfully and always managed to pull the meetings together. Charles Smith, for his sterling efforts in supporting Mark and helping to make sense of all the meeting output. The presenters from various organisations who bared their souls to share with us the reality of their experiences. Colleagues in the Network who left egos at the door but brought in their knowledge, intellects and enthusiasm. The EPSRC for funding this work. The authors of the papers for doing what they said they would do, and to the reviewers, who provided their own unique insights and comments on what we had done. Lastly, to Miles Shepherd and Rodney Turner for supporting the idea of a Special Issue on the work of the Network. Top people.

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