

Delivering a Brighter Future for IT Projects?

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IT project performance used to be characterised by runaway projects, late delivery, exceeded budgets, reduced functionality, and questionable quality that could translate into cancellations, reduced scope, and significant rework cycles. To combat the less favourable track record of project delivery, the UK's Association for Project Management has formed a rather challenging vision of a world where all projects succeed by the year 2020. But on my wish list for 2017, there is a more modest aspiration for a new kind of better-informed and more successful project management.

In looking forward to a bright future, projects provide an exciting arena where human ambition and daring imagination continue to drive societal endeavours and achievements. Yet, even the successful delivery of a project is no longer sufficient. Life does not stand still. The bar, it seems, is always being raised and with it the expectations regarding what can be achieved through projects and the ambition and appetite to deliver more.

Over the years, commentators have noted that achievement often motivates the next cycle of endeavours as humans seek longer bridges, taller buildings, faster cars, and more responsive and integrated systems. Extending our reach inevitably means taking a chance and testing the limits of our capability and knowledge, especially in the context of project work.

Greater ambition also signals the need to accommodate rising levels of complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and change. Meanwhile, as we learn to cope with a world that is more volatile, multifaceted, and interconnected — yet risky — we need to hone our skills and capabilities.

Attempting more demanding undertakings requires innovative new methods for delivering, guiding, and managing projects. Meanwhile, the rise in complexity and uncertainty demands new ways of thinking about projects.

Project Management in 2017

So how do we deliver the wish of success? This article builds upon the recent trends identified in the book, *Further Advances in Project Management: Guided Exploration in Unfamiliar Landscapes* [published by Routledge].[1] Recognising that concerns around successful delivery, value realisation, resilience and making change stick force a significant re-evaluation of the scope and extent of the 'normal' project discourse; the book brings together many of the leading thinkers and practitioners in an effort to offer new insights and perspectives and distil new knowledge through narrated exploration. While the book offers a wealth of new ideas, models, and perspectives that encourage new conversations around projects and project management, the following seven overarching themes emerge as the key trends and changes in project management that will require our attention in 2017.

People

Projects are about people, but project management says little about this aspect. Yet, people are difficult to include, plan for, and satisfy. Methods to deliver improved project experiences increasingly account for the human aspects of projects and better address stakeholders, motivation, needs discovery, engagement, marketing, influencing, persuading, and understanding of users and their role. Examples of such new methods include systemic evaluation of the spheres of influence, driving stakeholder engagement by role and contribution, determining the (human) pace of progress, re-positioning projects as 'social endeavours', focusing on gatekeepers, customers and client chains, and contractors as

stakeholders, utilising choice engineering, applying project resilience and considering the methodology of compelling behaviours.

Leadership

A theme that emerges from the different conversations in the project space, including those highlighted in the book, is the need to move from managing to leading. Managing is the hallmark of certainty and a control-oriented perspective, while leadership points to a different and more varied skill set. The combination of uncertainty and a greater reliance on a network of participants requires a more organic approach emphasising influence, participation, and collaboration.

Context

Projects rely on situational and contextual factors that managers need to understand. Interacting with projects in complex environments requires an awareness of the specific characteristics, including informational, contextual, strategic, geomorphological, geological, environmental and public perception considerations and a willingness to experiment and adapt.

Strategy

Project management is concerned with the delivery of projects, while projects link strategy and execution. Improving the alignment between strategy and execution requires strategic-level engagement from project professionals.

Value

Projects are often created to satisfy strategic needs and objectives, and therefore project management is increasingly called upon to deliver benefits and value. However, it is completed projects that satisfy users, which subsequently attract benefits, and not project management per se. For example, a completed bridge does not deliver a benefit stream, until it begins to be utilised by pedestrians moving across to the other side of town. This is an important lesson to digest. Benefit realisation and value delivery capability can be linked to projects, but only via a strategic, or organisational, frame of thinking that extends beyond execution.

Long-Term Thinking

The long-term perspective is often invoked to consider ethics, decision making, return on investment, benefits realisation, value accumulation, decommissioning, extended life cycles and warranty periods. It is here that the distinction between temporal project management, focused on delivery to pre-defined schedules according to pre-determined milestones; and the sustained outcomes, and even outputs of a project, come into play. Sharing knowledge, resources, and talent often requires organisational considerations that extend beyond any single project. Similarly, as project managers are asked to relate to a wider horizon, or adopt an extended life cycle, they enter a different level of conversation about the project and its impacts, and therefore need new ways of reasoning for such conversations, by employing new and extended methods of addressing multiple levels of success, timely engagement modes and ultimate project outcomes.

Innovation

Innovation and experimentation feature in conversations about requirements, resilience, decision making, and new mindsets as they provide essential learning opportunities for validating and improving performance. Moreover, adaptation, trial-and-error, and resilience enable managers to adjust and respond to the unknown.

What Are the Main Implications of These New Ways of Thinking?

The combined impact of adopting the emerging themes in 2017 has interesting ramifications for professionals and offers a potential for a re-positioning of the discipline of project management.

Firstly, the trends and changes imply adjustments to the role and importance of project managers. Participating in strategic conversations, innovating, delivering value, and aligning projects with business strategy requires a more central position. Engaging in a range of strategic roles may lead to the re-emergence of the professional thinker, integrator, synergy-aware, and stakeholder-savvy executive with greater organisational understanding and clearer links to strategy, benefits, value, and impacts.

Secondly, the idea of multiple **perspectives**, **alternative** lenses, and the use of fresh metaphors may support the development of **complementary** options and arrangements for projects and action and lead to fundamental improvements and innovations in terms of the approaches and **viewpoints** employed by project managers in accounting for wider areas and interests. Formulation of projects relies on the perceptions we hold. If we are able to question and challenge the purpose, value and outcomes of proposed undertakings and view them from alternate vantage points, we may be able to conceive more useful and meaningful projects that deliver essential benefits and address real concerns and issues.

Thirdly, the understanding of project success would benefit greatly from the ideas explored in the book and other recent work [2]. Success in the future will require deeper engagement with the business. It also implies an acute understanding of the values and preferences of different, yet much wider, circles of stakeholder communities, possibly arranged in complex and interconnected ecologies embracing supply chains, coalitions, spheres of influence and common values and preferences. The set of concerns is likely to encompass sustainability and survivability issues, extended time horizons, and the impact of wider communities with shared interests. Greater sensitivity to context, consideration of the different phasing of life cycles, and adding a longer-term perspective would allow the focus to shift from efficiency of execution to an extended life cycle perspective. This will support change, adaptation, and resilient posturing and offer potential capability to better accommodate urgent and unexpected perturbations. The old tools and approaches that characterise the classic mindset will thus be augmented by new thinking mechanisms and reflection skills, such as reasoning about multiple levels of success, determining the pace of projects, utilising resilience modes, and applying complexity, humanistic, systemic models, which will enable practitioners to better balance ethical, economic, and environmental considerations.

The new themes point to new priorities in terms of leading people, re-positioning projects, redefining success, and focusing on the delivery of value in the new world of projects. Many of the ideas can be easily adapted to augment current practices. Others may provide the seed for developing future improvements in project practice. Used together in 2017, they enable project professionals to begin to address the concerns around projects, update current thinking and start to repair the track record of IT asset, project, and service delivery.

Endnote

¹Dalcher, Darren (2017). *Further Advances in Project Management: Guided Exploration in Unfamiliar Landscapes*. New York: Routledge.

Dalcher, Darren (2014). 'Rethinking Success in Software Projects: Looking Beyond the Failure Factors'. In, Ruhe, G. and Wohlin, C. (Eds.), *Software Project Management in a Changing World* (pp. 27-49). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Dalcher, Darren (2014) 'What can Project Success, or Failure, Tell us about Project Management theory?', in Theory meets Practice in Projects, edited by Wagner, Reinhard and Rietiker, Stephen, GPM, June 2014, pp. 16-31.

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