

Understanding the professional project manager: Cosmopolitans, locals and identity work



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KEYWORDS

- Cosmopolitan
- Local
- Work identity
- Body of Knowledge (BoK)

Article Highlight:

This paper explores and examines the duality of 'local' knowledge (company; sector) and 'cosmopolitan' knowledge (specialist skills, often transferrable) that project managers have and rely on.

What does the paper cover?

Project managers operate under a kind of 'dual identity'. They rely on their knowledge of the company or institution they work for and/or the industry sector they are employed in. They also rely on their expert knowledge of managing projects; a skill that can be transferrable between employers and sectors.

This presents a dilemma for professional bodies and for employers. Professional bodies will want to persuade project managers who rely mostly on their local knowledge to become more cosmopolitan in their outlook. Recognition by a professional body, such as a qualification or affiliation, can give the individual practitioner some independence from a specific employer and a route to career progression.

Employers, on the other hand, will want their more cosmopolitan project managers to take local knowledge into account without compromising their professional skills.

The paper shows that project management is rich in identity work. While there are project managers who clearly lean further towards one or the other, the majority of practitioners draw on both identities. In doing so, they are, in effect, challenging the concept of professionalising project management.

Methodology:

The authors undertook 39 semi-structured interviews with practitioners working in three companies in the defence industry. This particular industry was chosen because project management is well established and mature in that sector.

The authors also looked at management documentation at the chosen companies, such as structures, policies and procedures.

Research findings:

Professionalism: The majority of project managers interviewed were not members of any professional association, and several were uncertain about the value of professionalism or of affiliation with a professional body.

Local knowledge: Related to that was interviewees' pride in their knowledge of the technical detail of the work of the company; or in valuing knowledge of people and places over that which could be considered specialist to the role of project manager (it's not what you know, but who!).

Evolution: Research suggests that the picture is changing. All three companies looked at showed evidence of how they had encouraged membership of APM, or had recruited specifically to the role where knowledge of project management was more important than experience in their specific industry.

Conclusions:

- Project managers are, in the ways they carry out their roles, challenging the usefulness of universal terminologies and methodologies.
- The tensions between organisational needs for loyalty and for expert skills remain and should be looked into further.
- Project management is rich in identity work and identity theory.

Significance of the research:

The interviews conducted as part of the research showed three distinct tensions among project managers:

Primary affiliation: The project manager identifies with his/her profession vs identifies with his/her company.

Knowledge and skill: The project manager values professional knowledge more vs values local knowledge more.

Model of practice: The project manager practices at a strategic level, using mostly professional BoKs and systems vs practices at a detail level, using mostly local knowledge.

Comments from authors:

This research represents something of a new direction as it connects the growing body of research on project management as a new 'corporate profession' with research investigating identity in work. Our intention with this paper was to define how the increasingly coherent profession of project management may be challenged by individual project managers' perceptions of themselves and of their role within their technical discipline and their place of work.

The broad categorisations of 'cosmopolitan' and 'local' that we employ and the dimensions we use to differentiate these we hope will encourage others to consider the plural nature of this profession and the nature of the contested terrain that project managers inhabit within large organisations.

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Complete article

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Cosmopolitan:	Favouring professional skills and specialism to that which is unique to a particular company or institution.
Local:	Favouring knowledge of company customs and loyalties to that of professional specialisms.
Work identity:	Creating and maintaining a recognisable work identity.
Body of Knowledge (BoK):	A set of standard terminology and guidelines.



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