

The unsettling of 'settled science': The past and future of the management of projects



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KEYWORDS

- Management of projects framework
- Project Management Body of Knowledge

Article Highlight:

Professor Peter Morris' management of projects (MoP) perspective unsettles the norm of project management theory and practice because he criticises standard guidance as being too execution-focussed.

What does the paper cover?

The paper considers the streams of research that have been influenced by the MoP perspective, and how the MoP has unsettled normative best practice, which the authors call the 'settled science' of project management. The study is also an introduction to a special issue, which gathers together the wider research of a range of authors and examines how their work relates to, and is shaped by, Morris' work.

Management of projects framework:

- Introduced by Peter Morris in 1994, with the latest incarnation released in 2013, the perspective requires a rethinking of the manner that organisations frame and manage their projects.
- Morris argues that standard practice, such as in the Project Management Institute's (PMI) Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBok) is too focussed on the delivery of projects, and so misses some key areas, most importantly the management of critical front-end activities.
- The MoP framework includes all the activities required to achieve project success and is not just a tools-and-techniques view of project execution.

Methodology:

This is the introduction to a special issue of the International Journal of Project Management, which brings together papers that reflect the ways in which Morris' work has shaped understanding of the project management field. The study splits the contributions into two groups, to focus on:

Group A the front-end definition of projects and programmes, and

Group B the core contribution of project management knowledge (called the body of knowledge).

Research findings:

Body of Knowledge: The MoP model extends the role of project managers and their team members to be involved at project definition, that is, not only as an efficient executor. This requires a much larger skill set than is applied through the PMI model, and challenges the sector to reassess the skills needed for successful project management. The special issue will examine how the Body of Knowledge should support and shape the professional paths for project managers.

Front-end project definition: The MoP model has already led to a lot of research on the front-end, definitional stage of projects. The special issue reviews the research to help with understanding of the importance of front-end definition of major projects in particular.

Research agenda: This study shows how Morris has shaped the research agenda over the last 30 years and how the agenda over the next 20 years might develop from his work, under three key areas:

- the prospects for theory in project management;
- new ideas of the field of project management research; and
- developing an empirical research agenda in project shaping.

Conclusions:

Replacing the traditional, execution-based, approach of project management with the MoP perspective will lead to more fruitful research because of the broader context and the more realistic reflection of the challenges faced by organisations.

Significance of the research:

For project managers: The research will help to define the skills set and qualifications of project managers and their teams.

For researchers: The research will open up more fruitful areas for theory development.

Comments from author:

In the era of megaprojects and the acceleration of project-based work, it is timely to reflect on the manner in which Peter Morris' MoP model reorients the 'real' duties of the successful project manager. Moving from a simple executor of others' strategies and project goals, the MoP demands that we take the time to reassess the correct role of the modern project manager. Given the authority, scope, and freedom of operation, project managers can and should be redeployed to their maximum advantage. At the same time, project management scholars need to rethink how we conduct research by re-examining the setting and often artificial boundaries that we place around the project life cycle. If we accept a narrow definition for projects and project management activities, we will inevitably produce a narrow and only partially valid perspective in studying the art and science of project-based work.

Comments from Professor Jeffrey Pinto

Peter Morris' work has been seminal in shifting our attention to the front end of projects. After all, the way projects are shaped largely determines the way they are executed. However, we still have relatively little insight into how the front end of projects is shaped in practice. We know it is about strategy, stakeholders, leadership, inadequate investment appraisal tools and much more, but we do not know how all these elements fit together. There is a significant research agenda here, which needs to focus on the organisations responsible for front-end definition – owners and investors – rather than the suppliers who actually execute projects, which have been our traditional focus.

Comments from Professor Graham Winch

Complete article

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Glossary:

Management of projects (MoP):

A perspective that extends the guidelines of project management beyond its traditional execution focus by arguing that strategic development at the front-end is key to project success.

Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBok):

The Project Management Institute's set of terminology and guidelines for project management.



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