Professional Project Management

The project management associations worldwide are at the forefront of the push to have project management recognised as a profession, but what does professional project management look like? To answer this question, we first need to understand the project a project manager is managing……

The PMBOK® Guide defines a project and project a 'temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product service or result'; and project management as 'the application of skills, knowledge, tools and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements'. These definitions are a good starting point but don't dig deep enough to define professional project management; an improved set of definitions[1] are:

- **Project**: A temporary organisation established to accomplish an objective, under the leadership of a person (or people) nominated to fulfil the role of project manager.

- **Project manager**: A person (or people) appointed to lead and direct the work of a project organisation on behalf of its stakeholders, to achieve the objective the project organisation was established to accomplish. The job title and the degree of authority and autonomy granted to the project manager are determined by the governance arrangements established by the stakeholders.

- **Project management**: The application of knowledge, skills tools and techniques to lead and direct the work of a project organisation.

Management is a process (requiring skills, knowledge, tools and techniques) used by a manager to motivate and direct the work of the people the manager is managing[2]; in the case of a project, the group of people endeavouring to create the project's deliverables.

The first challenge in understanding the profession of project management and the difference between project and general management is recognising that the group of people involved in the project form a temporary and dynamic organisation.

The temporary organisation being managed by the project manager may include full time and part time people in many different configurations:

- a traditional functional delivery team,

- a cross-functional team,

- a virtual team (functional or cross functional), or

- a diverse group of people from a federation of contractors and suppliers brought together under a range of supply contracts to deliver the project.

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[1]   For an in-depth discussion on how these ***definition*** were derived see:
       https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2016/08/11/seeking-a-definition-of-a-project/

[2]   The ***functions of management*** were described 100 years ago by Henri Fayol, see:
       https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1094_Defining_Management.pdf

Many projects include combinations of all of these different groupings at different stages of its life cycle. The temporary organisation for each project builds in the early stages, may change character completely in the middle (eg, as the project transitions from 'design' to build') and dissipates in the later stages. Each of these temporary organisations is unique and ever changing (dynamic).

What are the objectives of a project?

The concept of a project's objectives, and therefore scope, are also difficult to define precisely[3]. Projects do not exist in nature; they are created by the action of people, usually executives, deciding to define the work needed to create a specific deliverable as 'a project'.

However, the decision that creates 'a project' in one organisation may create several in another; for example

- To implement a new function, one organisation may choose to integrate organisational change within a development project, whereas another organisation may choose to appoint a technical project manager to develop the deliverable and create a separate project, run by a specialist change manager to implement the changes needed to make effective use of the deliverable across its workforce (recognising very different skill sets are needed).

- To implement a process upgrade effecting manufacturing plants in several States, one organisation may choose to set up a single large project to manage upgrades across all of the plants, another a series of smaller projects each focused on one State, yet another may set up a program to manage the work and let the program run coordinated projects in each separate plant.

All of these options will create 'projects' that meet the definitions proposed above but they are very different entities to manage.

How does this affect project management?

To further challenge the concept of 'a project', the same deliverable (eg, a new facility) may be at the centre of two quite different projects! When a project is being delivered by a contracting company to a client organisation it is common to see both a delivery project manager (working for the contractor to create the deliverable defined in its contract) and a client-side project manager running a project to acquire the deliverable.

The work of the delivery project manager is well defined in the PMBOK® Guide, to be successful, all the delivery project manager has to do is build the new facility so that it meets the specified contract scope and quality; and to be successful do so within the contracted price and timeframe.

The role of the client-side project manager is quite different and not so well documented. Client-side project managers should:

- Work to ensure the delivery organisation and project are aligned to the needs of the client;
- Have the authority to represent the client organisation;
- Maintain the link between the project and the strategy of the client organisation;
- Lead the relationship with the delivery organisation;

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3   For a discussion on this topic see:
    https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2016/08/11/seeking-a-definition-of-a-project/

- Create an environment for success that allows the delivery organisation the best chance of succeeding;
- Manage the way the client organisation interfaces with the delivery organisation and project:
- Conduct internal reporting to the sponsor and other managers within the client organisation;
- Respond to requests for information, change requests and other communications from the project on behalf of the client organisation and manage the resolution of each issue;
- Maintain the commercial contract with the delivery organisation and monitor performance.

These 'client side' functions are essential for overall project success and meet the definition of a *'temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product service or result'*; but represent a very different type of 'project manager'.

Then there is the degree of authority granted to a project manager to manage his or her project, which can vary enormously, some project managers are responsible for budgets of $millions and hire the people they need for their project, others have far less authority and autonomy. And finally, the various classifications of project: by size, industry, complexity and project management methodology being deployed (eg, agile -v- waterfall).

Despite the diversity outlined above, there are important commonalities. Fist each of these 'endeavours' are seen as projects by the project manager and the project stakeholders; and regardless of the range of projects and degrees of autonomy and authority, every project manager aims to deliver his or her project successfully[4].

The core element of project management

Where does this leave the concept of a project management profession? From the discussion so-far we have established that the concept of project management covers a very diverse range of management positions, managing a range of equally diverse temporary organisations. However, many people actively choose to define themselves as project managers and treat the work they are managing as 'a project' and most people recognise a project manager when they meet one. For this to occur there has to be a common 'core' that defines the practice of managing projects - this common core can be used to build a profession.

The consistent element identified above that differentiates project management from general management is the temporary and relatively self-contained nature of the project team assigned to undertake the work of the 'project'. The focus of project management is building a temporary organisation, delivering the project objective and then closing the temporary organisation as efficiently as possible; whereas the focus of general management is the sustainment and improvement of a relatively stable organisation. This core trait of project management is supported by a range of 'special' tools, techniques and methodologies designed to assist in the process; these are described in a range of publications not least of which being the PMBOK® Guide.

Therefore, having identified a key difference between project management and general management, it follows project management is capable of being seen as a distinct profession.

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[4] Success has many different facets - the old concept of the 'iron triangle' of time cost and scope has long gone, these days success is defined as 'meeting or exceeding stakeholder expectations' but which stakeholders and what expectations can be very difficult to determine and perceptions of success may well change over time.

Understanding the concept of a 'profession'.

The term 'profession' has a number of distinct attributes that have changed over time.

The starting point for being a 'professional' is the fact you are paid for your work. Professional football players are paid, amateurs are not (although in many sports, 'amateurs' are as skilled as the 'professionals').

The next element of 'professional' relates to skill and pride in the quality of the work being produced. Many trades people consider themselves 'professional' brick layers, plasters, artists, etc., because as well as receiving payment for their work, they are proud of the quality of the work they accomplish.

The traditional concept of a 'Profession' (capital 'P') builds onto these fundamental attributes by introducing concepts such as 'public good'. The 'Professions' evolved from a need to regulate the delivery of skilled services to the community, the service generally performed by educated gentlemen.

Traditional skills and trades such as stone masons and wool merchants had been represented by The Guilds since the middle ages. This relatively new concept of a university educate gentleman undertaking a skilled role such as accountancy, engineering or surgery needed a new framework (18th century class structures made joining 'guilds' untenable); and the concept of a 'Professional Institution', made up of its 'Professional Members' emerged.

These Institutions were created by their members to act as regulatory bodies for the Profession they represented that established formal qualifications based upon education and examination, with powers to admit and discipline members, and some degree of monopoly rights in the wider community. Early modern tradition recognised four professions: divinity, medicine, law and engineering. This starting point expanded through the 19th and 20th Centuries to encompass a range of other Professions and the expansion is continuing.

The characteristics of a Profession

Traditionally, a Profession:

- Is an occupationally related social institution concerned with an identified area of knowledge, established and maintained as a means of providing essential services to its individual members and the society in which it operates.
- Renders a specialized service based upon advanced, specialised, knowledge and skill. The profession collectively, and individually, possess a body of knowledge and a repertoire of behaviours and skills (professional culture) needed to practice the profession and make decisions in the service of the client.
- Is organized into one or more professional associations which, within broad limits of social accountability, are granted autonomy in control of the actual work of the profession and the conditions that surround it (admissions, educational standards, examination and licensing, career paths, ethical and performance standards, professional discipline).
- Enjoys a common heritage of knowledge, skill, and status to the cumulative store of which professional members are bound to contribute through their individual and collective efforts.
- Is bound by a distinctive ethical code in its relationships with clients, colleagues, and the public.
- Is charged with a substantial degree of public obligation by virtue of its possession of specialised knowledge.

- Performs its services to a substantial degree in the general public interest, receiving its compensation through limited fees rather than through direct profit from the improvement in goods, services, or knowledge, which it accomplishes.

This framework was supported by governments which used membership of 'Professional Institutions' as a convenient way to regulate the provision of services to the general public. For example, the concept of being a 'doctor' evolved from the medieval concept of someone with some practical knowledge and skills (possibly acquired by working as an apprentice or assistant) into the modern form where in many parts of the world, to be licenced, a Doctor has to be a member of the relevant professional association.

For traditional 'Professions' this tidy arrangement between the individual, the Professional Institution and the government worked very effectively in many parts of the world through to the 1950s and 60s. However, in the last 50 years or so, the traditional framework has started to break down and new concepts are emerging. Governments are increasingly moving to directly regulate the provision of 'professional services' to the public, with the professional associations focusing on education, skills development and the encouragement of 'good practice'. There seems to be three distinct types of professional association:

- Those that qualify and licence members to practice the Profession – sometimes with the support of government regulations.
- Those that qualify members but where the government separately licences the member to practice.
- Those that qualify members but there is no regulatory constraints on practice – membership is a 'competitive advantage'.

The concept of 'professional institutions' such as PMI and IPMA fit into this last paradigm. The 'Associations' are focused on developing the knowledge and capability of the profession but anyone can practice.
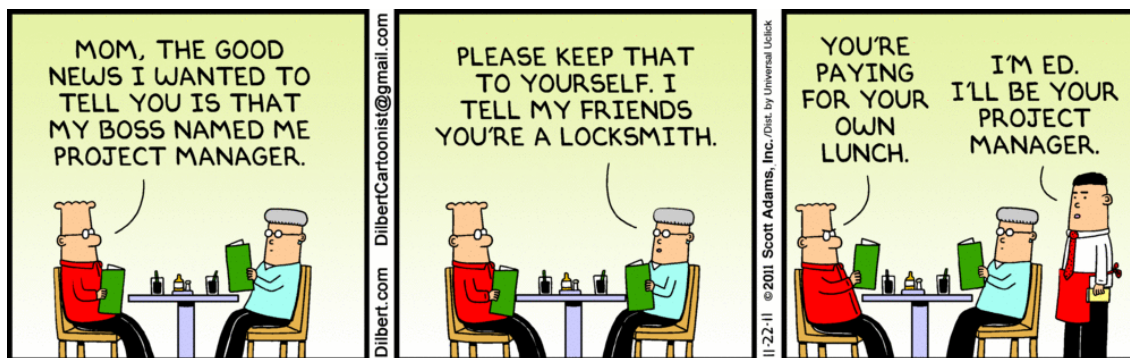
This creates an interesting anomaly! Traditionally 'Professions' emerged from a group of professional practitioners creating an association to protect and advance their specialist skills and knowledge, restrict entry to the Profession and frequently (with the support of governments) prevent non-professionals from practicing in the field.

In contrast, project management would appear to have evolved to the stage where there are Professional Institutions, fulfilling all of the traditional roles of knowledge development, standardisation and qualification setting. But to a large extent, it is the Associations that are driving the development of the profession and are actively seeking members. Many individuals are 'Professional Project Managers' by choice, but the lack of regulation allows anyone to practice.

This suggests the concept of 'Professionalism' is changing and the consequences of the evolution of precisely what it means to be 'A Profession' is far from certain. The only thing that is clear at the present

time is that the old style 'gentlemen's clubs' with power to restricted access to the Profession they represented are losing that power. A speculative assessment of the role and function of the Professions in the 21st Century suggests:

- Governments will increasingly take control of the 'right to practice' but only in the areas where public safety is an issue.
- Professional Associations / Institutions will remain custodians of the specialist knowledge, skills and practice underpinning the Profession they represent, set benchmarks for qualifications and provide a link between practitioners and academia.
- Individuals will increasingly separate qualifications and certifications from membership of associations. The qualification will be an important benchmark in a person's career development, whereas membership of an Association will become optional.
- Associations may find restricting membership to fully qualified practitioners unnecessary or untenable.

So, to answer the question posed at the start of this article 'Is project management a Profession?' if your benchmark is the practices of the 19th and 20th centuries, definitely not – the 'Professional Associations' do not control the right to practice as a project manager. However, in the paradigm of the 21st century, we are well on the way to being a 'modern profession' based on Professional Associations. And while the 'right to practice' project management is never likely to regulated (we don't threaten public safety in the way doctors and engineers can); the desire of employers to engage Professional Project Managers (ie, capable, qualified and ethical people) is already becoming apparent[5].

The challenge for the Associations over the next few years will be developing the elements beyond certifications needed to support Professional Project Managers, and to create ways to make this distinction attractive to members and recognisable to employers – simple certifications are unlikely to be enough, the associations and its professional members will need to demonstrate a distinct 'professional' way of working.

Given the massive differences in practice between an engineering project manager running a multi-million building site and an 'agile' IT project manager developing a new app, defining the core elements of professional practice will not be easy. Some of the areas I believe will be important are:

- **Stakeholder engagement and communication**: projects are done by people for people. Effectively working with and influencing people is the key to success[6].
- **Practical ethics**: courageously and honestly providing the best information possible (based on reliable processes), and dealing with uncertainty (risk) and problems openly and effectively[7].
- **Managing your project team**: projects are temporary organizations with a unique set of challenges for the team leader[8].
- **Focusing beyond narrow constraints of success** (time, cost and scope): partnering with executive management and contributing to the creation of a successful project outcome. Professional project managers will be at the centre of an organization's ability to generate value from change.

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5   A key advance in the recognition of project management as a profession, represented by professional associations, has been the decisions of the High Court and Privy Council in the UK to grant a Royal charter to the Association for Project Management. For more on this see:
     https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2016/10/21/the-profession-of-project-management/

6   For more on *stakeholder engagement* see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-075.php

7   For more on *ethics in project management* see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-005.php

8   For more on *project team management* see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-010.php#Teams
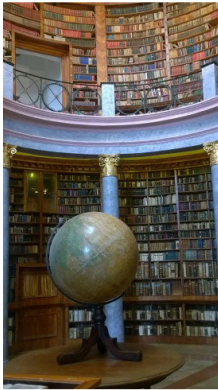
Outlining these concepts is easy – measuring and qualifying professional practitioners will be much more challenging – but we seem to have an interesting future emerging.

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First Published 28 November 2016 – Augmented and Updated