Project Management Relevance amid Skepticism

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Abstract

Markus Hällgren, Andreas Nilsson, Tomas Blomquist, and Anders Söderholm's article in the International Journal of Managing Projects in Business, *Relevance lost! A Critical Review of Project Management Standards* argues that Project Management has or may become an irrelevant occupation. This assumption is based on several factors: its designation as a profession, lack of consistency in training, lack of consistency in results, standards, and other criteria. This paper discusses the appointment of Project Management as a profession and whether or not that discussion is relevant to Project Management's relevance. It also shows how variability is a positive quality that allows for greater efficiency and enhances project management's relevance, as each variable is based on the standard, meaning The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide). Recent data on growth, current and proposed, in the career field also demonstrate greater relevancy in project management as a practice and potential profession.

Markus Hällgren, Andreas Nilsson, Tomas Blomquist, and Anders Söderholm's article in the International Journal of Managing Projects in Business, *Relevance lost! A Critical Review of Project Management Standards* (2012, p 457- 485), makes the arguments that lack standardization of project management in education, research, certification, and practices have made or is in danger of making the career irrelevant. Although in context they make several valid points; they also make a flawed assertion by insisting that the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) is an absolute "standard" for how project management should be conducted. Taking away the necessary flexibility inherent in the applications of these standards lumps all Project Managers and projects into one mind set and fails to view the individuality and variability many understand as built into the PMBOK Guide. Many Project Managers see the PMBOK Guide as a tool box used as needed to better manage projects; and there are other tool boxes, to tap into to initiate, plan, execute, monitor and control project processes.

Relevance is a subjective idea. To one religion certain relics or ideas are irrelevant; to another, they are crucial, life sustaining, and more than relevant. To claim a practice or volume of knowledge has lost relevance because it doesn't fit a personal perception as an established standard is arrogant. History has great examples of how ideas and process from the past thought to be irrelevant can turn out to be very relevant.

In the early 1960's the US Air Force decided with its first iteration of the F-4 phantom, an air superiority fighter jet, that the innovation of radar, rocket and missile technology, meant lead projectile guns were no longer required. They had become obsolete. Hoping to save weight, money and development time guns were left off the aircraft.

As the Vietnam War heated up unusually high US fighter jet losses became a concern. In Korea, the United States fighter jets kill ratio was 6-10 to1. In Vietnam, the F-4 was struggling

to maintain a 2 to 1 kill ratio (Roblin, 2016). The problem was, after all its missiles were spent

the big fast heavy fighter jet had no options but to run; that was when units began to mount

marginally accurate external gun pods on the aircraft. After the installation of internal guns, the

Air Force kill ratio increased to nearly 4 to 1.

This is a vivid example of how a perception of irrelevant has turned out to be irrelevant.

Now to analyze the article on face value and point out my disagreement with the conclusion

implied. I will discuss Project Management topics and alleged irrelevance, then show how

Project Management is growing and increasing in relevance.

Relevance Doesn't Mean Idyllic Copy

The first claim of loss of relevance is that "management theories threaten to become

irrelevant if there is not a strong and definite connection between the…approaches…and practice

they are meant to depict" (Hällgren, Nilsson, Blomquist, & Söderholm, 2012, p 457).

Management theories are constantly evolving; that doesn't make the original theory obsolete.

People respond differently and there are as many management tools as there are personalities to

apply them. The idea that project management theory requires modification to reach optimal

performance should be celebrated as progress not discounted as no longer meaningful. The old

cliché of "not throwing out the baby with the bathwater" is relevant to this argument.

Project Management process groups lay out what most logical thinkers do, even if

informally, to develop, perform, manage, and conclude a project. They develop an idea (the

Initiating process); research the idea, and purchase supplies (the Planning process); then

assemble the pieces (the Execution process); as assembly continues they resolve conflicts (the

monitor and controlling process); and finally the project is completed and delivered.

As you can see even with different wording it's still the same process. All the PMBOK Guide does is providing tools for how to proceed through the processes in an organized fashion. It also provides a sort of checklist to help you optimize your project organization. There are other related programs that enhance projects in different ways and depending on the type of project structure may be more appropriate at times. But like the old fashioned machine gun on the F-4 phantom don't discount a tool or process as irrelevant because you have others that work also.

Practice Turn

The next portion of the article concentrates on a term the authors call the "practice turn." "The "practice turn" in social science (Schatzki et al., 2001) states that the micro-activities of organizing must be examined to understand the practice (as cited in Hällgren, Nilsson, Blomquist, & Söderholm, 2012). The discussion here covers the implications that to validate and understand a practice one must be able to analyze, study, and duplicate the micro activities of a process and achieve the same or similar results consistently.

Johnson, Melin, and Whittington, in their article *Micro strategy and strategizing: towards an activity-based view* (2003, p. 3) states: "a practice perspective includes "an emphasis on the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organizational life and which relate to [organizing] outcomes"" (as cited in Hällgren, Nilsson, Blomquist, & Söderholm, 2012). Although this statement was used to support their argument of Project Management falling into irrelevancy with regards to consistency, I found it supportive of the contrary argument.

The fact that implementation of micro activities within the project management methodology does provide "related organizing outcomes;" "related," meaning that they are valid

and work as anticipated, not necessarily exactly as expected; implies that processes developed

using project management practices meet this criterion. The number of uncontrollable variables

with in projects influence deviations, but for the most part use of the PMBOK Guide as an

organizing and strategic guide is a sound practice to achieve an organized and efficient

conclusion.

Sometimes people over analyze a process and come away with a flawed view of the

importance or desirability of a process. Kind of like looking at a Van Gogh painting close up;

you get the perspective of how his brush strokes were laid down, but the overall impression of

the art work is better viewed from a distance. Many of the processes in life have a basic

foundation that requires a more macro introspection to appreciate the relevance to the overall

outcome.

Standardization of Knowledge vs. Profession vs. Relevant.

The next portion of the article, which is the bulk of the thesis, became somewhat mired

into a mix of knowledge verse accreditation verse authority to practice project management. The

primary takeaway from this was that because project management differs from organization to

organization and legal authority to practice management of a project isn't solidified by licenses

from major sanctioning bodies or government then its relevance as a profession is questionable.

To find out if Project Management is a profession I turned to Dr. Paul Giammalvo, Doctor of

Philosophy in Strategy, Program & Project Management.

In his thesis, *Is Project management a profession, if yes, where does it fit in and if not

what is it,* Dr. Paul Giammalvo (2009) gives examples of why Project Management is not a

profession. He summarized his findings in an article for mpug.com. During his research, he

conducted surveys of "400 professional practitioners" based on "22 intrinsic an extrinsic

attributes" which define a profession (Giammalvo, 2011). Project management only scored a 34

percent of the accepted quantified criteria to be considered a profession. There were lots of

specifics given for which we have no room to elaborate on but suffice it to say Project

Management as an occupation is considered not to be a profession, yet.   Dr. Giammalvo (2009)

summed it all up in his thesis conclusion:

> Using the results of this global survey as the basis and applying a variety of both
>
> qualitative and quantitative analyses, I can conclude that:
>
> 1. Project management is not yet a profession.
>
> 2. It is a process, methodology or system, and as such may never become a profession.
>
> 3. Project management is considered by practitioners to be less of a profession than being
>
> an MBA [Master of Business Administration] but more of a profession than being an
>
> electrician, with the ranking closer to MBA than to electrician.
>
> 4. That in order to enhance the image ('professionalization') of project management, it
>
> becomes imperative that, like chiropractic, acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine,
>
> project management practitioners need to focus on improving the consistent, repeatable
>
> delivery of 'successful' projects. And that in order to realize more successful projects, we
>
> need to
>
> 5. Match project manager accountability with a commensurate level of authority- over
>
> time, resources and quality by enabling the project managers in our organization to make
>
> autonomous decisions in the best interests of the consuming public (p 310).

To the argument, Project Management is not a profession I yield to the more learned

doctor and authors of the Journal I'm critiquing. However, the lack of an official label as a

"profession" does not negate the relevance of the practice or performance of project management

methods; nor the explicit professional development of practitioners while participating decidedly in its processes.

The standards of learning compared to other professions are still in their infancy and creative ideas are developing new ways to manage projects mostly based on the foundation of the PMBOK Guide. The broad application of these standards to meet specific business models makes Project Management more relevant not less.

Turn to a dictionary or the internet, and you will find several similar sounding definitions of the term "relevance"; none state that relevance is predicated upon a prestigious title or label. The idea that an occupation is irrelevant because it' hasn't been deemed a professional occupation is short sighted. Relevance should be established based on the populace practice or reliance on the processes for a successful project or business achievement as well as growth in usage.

Project Management Relevance

The discipline of project management is growing. There are new formats and exciting new methods emerging all the time. This continued development is inherent in a program with an ideology to learning from prior mistakes. The concept of documenting, archiving and retrieving "Lessons Learned" is an essential gene in the Project Management DNA. As Chief Executive and Project Management Offices (PMO) and practitioners see the benefits in utilizing project management doctrines, they build relevance.

The concepts of Agile are becoming more prevalent in the successful PMOs. The older more cumbersome project processes are giving way to rapid development in shorter sprints, no pun intended. PMI (2017) reports that executive's realization of the need "to keep up with the pace of change [as being] critical to their future relevancy" (p 12) is an important consideration

when utilizing this format. One can conclude that if Project Management processes are essential

for business relevancy, then these process and Project Management are also relevant.

From the Project Management Institute (2017) global survey *Pulse of the Profession,*

"Organizations that invest in proven project management practices waste 28 times less money"

(Path to Progress). As businesses embrace the concepts and practices of project management,

they are seeing larger returns on their investments and greater efficiency in completing projects.

From the 3234 surveyed executives, there has been a marked decline in revenue lost, 20 % from

a year ago. (PMI, 2017 p 2, para 1). Recent data (Figure 1) shows that project performance is up

and the number failing projects are dropping which is a marked improvement from 2012 when

Hällgren Nilsson, Blomquist, and Söderholm's, wrote their thought provoking article.
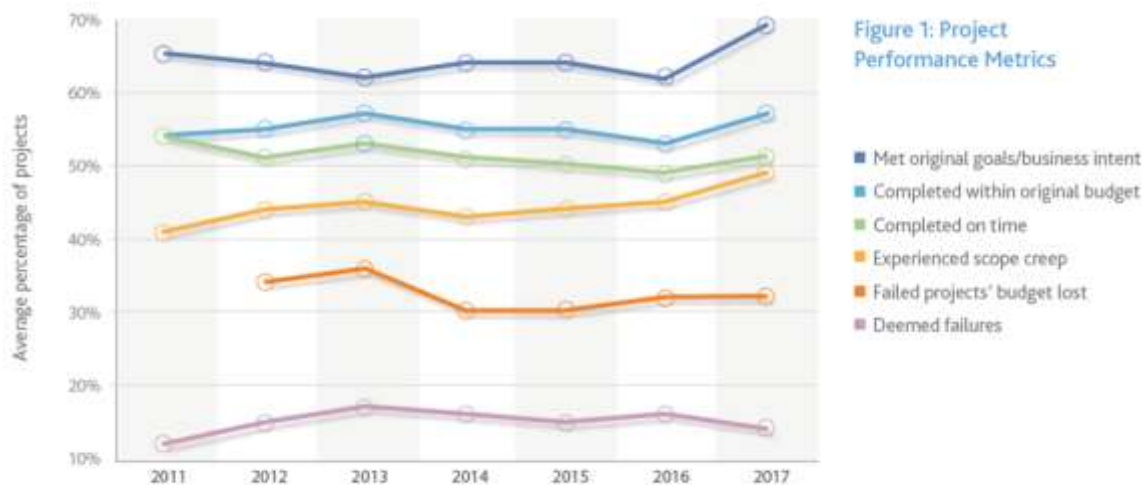

Figure 1. Project Performance Metrics. Reprinted from "Pulse of the Profession/ 2017: Success Rates Rise Transforming the high cost of low performance" by Project Management Institute, 2017, p.5. Copyright 2017 by Project Management Institute, Inc. Reprinted without permission.

The business world is a highly competitive arena; irrelevance is a death sentence to any

program or occupation so labeled. Although Project Management has seen a spike in relevant

performance as indicated by the recent data, its practitioners need to be on guard of becoming

complacent in old school practices. The PMBOK Guide is a great foundational tool for

knowledge and techniques and applied with other project management tools, and improved

techniques, it can remain relevant for years to come.

Fortunately, many organizations are expanding their use of Project Management. There

is talk of designating a seat at the "strategic table" (Wysocki, 2017) alongside the CIO. With

increased focus on customer relations and rapid innovation, the future need for a strategic project

manager is looking very good. "Organizations have been focusing on expansion and growth of

the Project Management Offices steadily since 2003" (Wysocki, 2017).

Dr. Wysocki's proposition to create a more strategic role for project managers is a very

intriguing and a sign of potential growth providing greater relevance for the Project Management

career path. It also goes a long way to legitimizing the occupation as a profession.

Conclusion

In response to the article from Hällgren, Nilsson, Blomquist, and Söderholm's, I've

demonstrated how relevance is a matter of perspective. The fact that those practitioners stuck on

the idea that the PMBOK Guide is a regulatory standard that must be stringently applied are miss

representing the purpose of the book as a body of knowledge. The Project Management Body of

Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) is a foundation of understanding, a checklist, of organizing best

practices for projects but not an omniscient directive without a potential for deviation as

circumstances require. The macro view of project management processes performed at the micro

organization level shows that the attention to detail provides stability to project outcomes while

maintaining a versatility to change and meet strategic or other organizational goals. The

development of other programs and ways of managing projects is a positive development not a

death nail in Project Management's relevance coffin. Increasingly project management practices

are positively affecting successful businesses increasing relevance. And there has been

considerable growth in recent years, and certainly since Hällgren, Nilsson, Blomquist, and

Soderholm's article, in the field of project management. Although considered by many

professionals to not be a profession Project Management and its concepts remain relevant and are

gaining recognizably in status in the business world.

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