

## **Driving Project Management – old hat or new challenges**

**By Tom Taylor**

When I was being taught to drive a car or automobile I remember being told to: hold on to the steering wheel, firmly but not tightly, to use both hands and to place them at “ten to two”. I do remember the confusion when I might need to steer with only one hand – starting the engine, operating signals, changing gear, applying the handbrake, turning the radio on and off. Progressively these things became second nature.

But back then I particularly remember being instructed **not** to look at my hands on the steering wheel. Also **not** to look at the bonnet or hood of my vehicle; **not** to look at the rear of the vehicle in front; **not** to look sideways at activities on the pavements or sidewalks; but to look down the road – to the horizon. That way I would be able to drive smoothly, safely, with comfort and consideration for my passengers, for other road users and pedestrians, for my vehicle and for myself.

Is there an analogy here for driving being like project managing? Is the hands on the steering wheel akin to writing “To do” lists? Is the hood or the bonnet the next event or meeting? Is the vehicle in front the next stage-gate or gateway? Is looking down the road about strategies, outcomes, destinations or benefits? As in driving does one really need to have them all in view and be aware / awake – and at the same time?

Alternatively or similarly is it valid to compare a project to going on a journey? Does one need a suitable vehicle, all passengers on board, sufficient fuel, a destination and a route to get there – with some contingencies and capabilities to overcome difficulties, distractions and unknowns?

Are such driving and journey analogies interesting but rather old hat these days? Perhaps they might still be helpful for basic inductions – to the world of projects – and how they might be managed – as some familiar fundamental analogies? Perhaps. Or in board room conversations and explanations? Perhaps.

So here we are in 2017; only just over a century since development of modern internal combustion engine (and the early foundations of modern project management). Currently we are seeing: credible electric vehicles and fuelling points have arrived; rent and hire rather than buy and keep are common; software controls in our vehicles and for managing traffic systems are in place; satellite navigation (as GPS) is standard, reliable and universal; and we are seeing advances and testing of artificial intelligence (AI) notably with driverless vehicles.

The impacts are considerable. Potentially a whole generation of truck drivers could be redundant; with a revolution in road haulage; and in commuting to work (while computing to work).

Can the vehicle analogy with its current developments continue to be considered or applied to the management of projects, programmes and portfolios? Who will be the PM instructors and who will be the PM learner drivers? Can the old and experienced continue to teach the young? Or will the aware need to be instructing the interested? Will we (all) need to take PM driving tests again – and again? Will anyone and everyone be able to drive, navigate, maintain and service their (project) vehicles – or simply not need to?

Are we in a period of project management perpetual transition where the old developed skills and techniques will indefinitely run alongside the developing applications and competences – to define and deliver projects? Or will there be a quantum leap and all the previous “ways we do things round here” will be lost or discarded or left at the kerbside?

Will we be sentimental about old style, handmade, human project management – similar to those historic cars and trucks in museums or can be seen in Cuba or Malta or other places – where the climate is kind? Will familiar teams solve the software challenges? Will flexibility subsume agility? Will the needs for professionalism and ethics increase exponentially? How will living and working in tomorrow’s world inform and influence each other?

Interesting times! And in conclusion. Please do **not** write and inform me of your answers. Please do **not** tell me the latest developments or formats for the “Highway Code” for project management. I would like to find them for myself – I am strapped in, engine power is available and I have checked the weather forecast – apparently in the short term it is unpredictable, after that it is unknown. Interesting times! Okay tell me if you must – through pmworld.

On a personal note I have interviewed many project managers for employment from assistant to senior. For quite a long time I looked for people with some “C” – clever, confident, creditable, communicator and qualified; and then I changed to people with “I” of intelligence, integrity, ingenuity, innovation, I generation and individualism. It could appear to be a big change of approach and must have been sudden and dramatic. But even with hindsight it does not feel that way. It sort of just happened. Interesting. Perhaps I was holding the steering wheel too tight.

Best wishes.

## About the Author



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**Tom Taylor** is from UK and is a principle of Dashdot, a joint founder of Buro Four and a vice-President of the Association for Project Management (APM). He is known as: a popular, confident and energetic speaker and broadcaster; a prolific author and publisher on innovative business and original management issues; an experienced and enthusiastic lecturer and course leader; and an award-winning, highly-experienced manager of projects, advisor and consultant. He passed his UK driving test at the second attempt.