

A viewpoint on guidelines for “non-traditional” projects

By Alan Stretton

Introduction

This viewpoint has been prompted by David Pells’ editorial article in the March 2017 issue of this journal regarding the growing importance of identifying categories, context and typology in project management, to help in adopting appropriate approaches to managing them. Pells pointed out that I have had an interest in developing such classifications. I also have an emergent interest in guidelines which have already been published for managing what I describe as “non-traditional” projects. This is the broad subject of this viewpoint, although the main focus is the question of how these might be related to “traditional” guidelines as they appear in project management bodies of knowledge and similar standards.

Problems with “one-size-fits-all” approaches

Current bodies of knowledge, competency standards and similar guidelines cover only certain types of projects. Pells noted that “there seems to be an emerging realization that the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach [to project management] may not be enough”. My observation is that, for well over two decades, multitudes of writers have been saying that “one-size-fits-all” most definitely does not apply to project management. I think Pells’ quote from Russ Archibald summarizes the situation nicely, when he says, “...the discipline of project management has not fully recognized that these different types of projects often exhibit different life cycle models and require different methods of governance, prioritizing, planning, executing and controlling....”.

In particular, the most widely used project management standard, PMI’s PMBOK Guide, appears to perpetuate the “one-size-fits-all” perspective, when it claims that the knowledge and practices it describes “are applicable to most projects most of the time”. This has been refuted countless times. For example, quite recently Prieto 2015:119 put it this way in the context of large complex projects (his emphasis):

Large complex projects differ from those that comprise the traditional domain of projects as defined and served by the Project Management Institute and its Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). Remember its admonishment that PMBOK provides a management framework for **most projects, most of the time**. Large complex project appear to live outside these boundary conditions.

So, there is evidently wide-spread skepticism about the “one-size-fits-all” implication that project management standards tend to carry with them. This implication is contradicted by so many writers – and is also contradicted by the realities of practice, as many practitioners can attest, including myself.

Re-stating the reason for current standards being so important

However, current standards are still enormously important. This is primarily because, as Shenhar & Dvir 2007:7 (and many others) have pointed out, they provide sound and well understood foundations for basic training and learning about project management. In my view, this critically important attribute should be specifically spelt out by each standard. Accompanying this, any “one-size-fits-all” implications should be denied, with appropriate commentary about broader spectrums of project types – i.e. “non-traditional” projects.

Guidelines for managing “non-traditional” projects

Now, most of us who write about project management are well aware that several guidelines for managing various types of “non-traditional” projects have already been published in the wider project management literature. For example, I have quite often referred to Turner & Cochrane’s 1993 goals-and-methods matrix, with its recommended start-up and implementation techniques for four different types of projects, three of which are “non-typical”. There will be few writers indeed who do not know about the classifications of projects developed by Shenhar and colleagues since the early 1990s (more about these shortly when we discuss Shenhar & Dvir 2007). Readers of this journal will know of the many contributions by Bob Prieto on “non-typical” large complex projects, later consolidated into his book Prieto 2015. Agile is also a candidate for managing a particular type of non-traditional project.

Facilitating awareness of “non-traditional” project management guidelines?

It appears that, with the possible exception of Agile, most people who look mainly to traditional standards for guidance have little cause to be aware of the existence of the types of “non-traditional” project management guidelines exemplified above. So, how could/should we promote pro-active awareness of the existence of such guidelines to people who use only traditional standards as guidelines?

Possibilities for traditional standards to point the way?

On paper, perhaps the most obvious way would be for the various project management standards themselves to make direct reference to “non-traditional” guidelines in whatever might be the most appropriate way for each standard.

As a particular example which relates directly to PMI’s PMBOK Guide, Shenhar & Dvir 2007 developed some tables which are highly relevant to this discussion. For each dimension of their NTCP model (Novelty, Technology, Complexity, Pace) they produced a table which has the (then) nine knowledge areas of the PMBOK Guide (PMI 2004) down the vertical axis, the three or four levels (or types) pertaining to each dimension on the horizontal axis, and a summary of how each of these different levels can affect (or impact on) traditional project management processes in each of the nine PMBoK knowledge areas. The format of their four tables is as follows.

PMBOK Guide Knowledge Area	DIMENSION:			
	Level:.....	Level:.....	Level:.....	Level:.....
Integration				
Scope				
Time				
Cost				
Quality				
Human resources				
Communications				
Risk				
Procurement				

Figure 1: Format of Shenhar & Dvir 2007 tables in Appendices 4, 5B, 6B, and 7

I have shown the lowest level uncoloured, as it is generally covered by “traditional” approaches. However the latter also intrude into the next level to greater or lesser extents, so that this aspect of the above figure should not be interpreted too literally.

To give something of the flavour of how Shenhar & Dvir depict changes in the recommended ways of managing the various PMBOK Guide knowledge areas as we move from the more “traditional” lower levels to the “non-traditional” higher levels, I use the example of project scope management in the four levels of their technology dimension, which is concerned with increasing levels of technological uncertainty. The latter are broadly described by the titles given to each level as shown in Figure 2. (In this case I have extended the non-coloured area (signifying the domain of “traditional” practices) to include the second level also, which appears to be broadly appropriate in this context).

PMBOK Guide Knowledge Area	DIMENSION: Technological uncertainty			
	Level: Low-tech	Level: Medium-tech	Level: High-tech	Level: Super hi-tech
Scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tight scope control from project initiation Allow only changes requested and approved by customer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow changes only before design freeze Tight scope control after design freeze 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define top-down work from scratch Allow more time for design cycles Tight scope control after design freeze to ensure product integrity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible scope management to enable changes based on technological feasibility and prototype testing

Figure 2: An example of varying recommendations regarding the management of project scope at different levels of Shenhar & Dvir’s technological uncertainty dimension. Derived from Shenhar & Dvir 2007, Appendix 5B, Table 4.

I regard the four tables of Shenhar & Dvir (in the format of Figure 1) as treasure in the context of depicting how project managers can move from the familiar domain of managing “traditional” projects into managing the increasing complexities of “non-traditional” projects, in each of the four dimensions of their NTCP model, and for each of the nine PMBOK Guide knowledge areas. (However, it appears that Shenhar & Dvir may not regard them as being as important as I do, since they are confined to Appendices, and are only very briefly referred to in the main text).

A missed opportunity?

Now, one of the most significant things for me is that, although they were published a decade ago, as far as I am aware no-one has picked up on Shenhar & Dvir’s tables, and appreciated, and acted on, their significance. For example, one could well have hoped that PMI might have seen this as an opportunity to expand the range of its PMBOK Guide. This did not happen. Perhaps they saw it as a threat? A second edition of Shenhar & Dvir’s book is in the works. Will it again be ignored by PMI? If experience to date is any guide, this is most likely – that is, unless PMI is (somehow) able to explicitly shift the PMBOK Guide from its “one-size-fits-all” pretensions to its real – and critically important place – as a basic guide on managing relatively non-complex projects.

Concluding

My main concern in this viewpoint has been to draw attention particularly to the outstanding contributions of Shenhar & Dvir in representing ways in which we can extend the range of guidelines about managing projects in the context of the PMBOK Guide’s knowledge areas, and notably their incremental approach to moving from “traditional” approaches into more appropriate management adaptations for managing “non-traditional” projects. This suggested to me that traditional standards may be able to find some way of pointing to the latter – but I am not optimistic that this will happen. Perhaps some readers can see more practical ways to publicize the existence of “non-traditional” guidelines. I certainly hope so.

References

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