Too Much of a Good Thing? An Examination on Development and Diffusion of Professionalization Concepts for Contemporary Project Managers

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Abstract. *This paper explores professionalization within the project management discipline going beyond the foundational body of knowledge to provide evidence of relevance, broadening, and adaptation. The study focuses on extending knowledge beyond the dominant voice of existing project management membership associations to examine keywords in leading project management academic journals for clues to new and divergent views on profesionalization. Despite an otherwise robust publication market in project management, new views on professionalization in this occupation appear rare. Recognition of project management as a profession appear limited to the current training and certification focus of membership associations. This provides an opportunity to expand the views of professionalism in project management by developing new definitions, forms and legitimacy beyond its' own community.*

Keywords. Professional services; professional identities; professional development; project based organizations; accreditation.

Project management as a technique and occupation has expanded rapidly and now constitutes a group consisting of over 500,000 registered members globally, and more on an informal basis. Over time, project managers have sought professional recognition by creating elaborate regimes to train and certify hierarchal designations. Despite this effort, project management membership associations have not achieved status equivalent to traditional professions, such as law, medicine, and the clergy. This creates a dilemma and the question ‑ is professionalization achievable? Project management is not

alone in this situation as other occupational groups with similar aspirations struggle to gain acceptance as a profession. There are many actors associated with project management, from academics, practitioners, consultants and professional associations. They all endeavour to advance the development of the occupation toward full internal and external recognition and legitimization through their respective views and roles.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONALIZATION IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT?

The concept of the professional brings with it connotations of elite status, above reproach values and behaviours, technical expertise, and a service ideal. The status of such designations has been defended by existing traditional professions and sought after for aspiring occupations as recognition of success, worth, and admiration. The definition of a profession is usually general and appears somewhat inadequate. Professions are described in the Macquarie Dictionary as "…a vocation requiring knowledge of some department of learning or science, especially one of the three vocations of theology, law, and medicine" (Macquarie Dictionary, 2009, p. 1325). Taking a more sociological perspective, Evetts definition included, "… occupations which are service- and knowledge-based and achieved sometimes following years of higher/further education and specified years of vocational training and experience" (Evetts, 2003, p. 397). She noted a dilemma as the "… concept of 'professionalism' has had a chequered history of use and contrasting (even contradictory) interpretations in the sociological literature." (Evetts, 2003, p. 399). Further, Evetts expressed perspectives on professions should include Parsons (1951) view, that modern professions created "… stability of a fragile normative social order" (Evetts, 2003, p. 400). She also noted Larson's (1977) 'professionalization project' concept, where processes and the development of a "… distinct occupational group sought a monopoly in the market for its service, and status and upward mobility (collective as well as individual) in the social order" (Evetts, 2003, p. 401). This change within professionalized groups is also examined by Abbott (1991) for clues and events, concluding professionalization was a process of diffusion.

Wilensky (1964) analysed the state of achievement of professional status in the United States and found a "loosely applied label" (Wilensky, 1964, p. 137). He found the description being applied

to occupations with specialization, work standards and licensing or certification associated with defining a profession and a perceived process of professionalization. This activity might be obscuring new, mixed forms or an emerging organization "… in some of the newer, marginal, or would-be professions" (Wilensky, 1964, p. 155). Wilensky's categorization might apply to project management as an aspiring profession. Wilensky (1964) scrutinized the established view of professional-oriented occupations as well as those potentially emerging,

> *"Which occupations have gone how far in professionalizing? Established solidly since the late Middle Ages have been law, the clergy, university teaching ...and to some extent medicine... Dentistry, architecture, and some areas of engineering (e.g., civil engineering) were professionalized by the early 1900's... Finally, many occupations will assert claims to professional status and find that the claims are honored by no one but themselves." (Wilensky, 1964, pp. 141-142).*
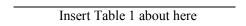
Emanating from sociology literature, existing project management 'professionalization' research has included examination of professional traits and characteristics (Morris, Crawford, Hodgson, Shepherd, & Thomas, 2006). Morris (2006, p. 711) also cites other researchers regarding the aspirations of project management , but only achieving some aspects of associated traits leading to descriptive terms such as 'semi-professions', 'para-professions', 'emerging professions' or 'commercialized profession'(Etzioni, 1969; Hanlon, 1998; Hugman, 1996; Zwerman & Thomas, 2001). Other researchers have taken a closer look at the state of professionalization in project management observing this had not fully developed along the lines of traditional professions (Algeo, 2008; Twyford, 1999). other knowledge-based occupations (Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, & Hall, 2011; Pollack & Algeo, 2015) is a way of evaluating the claims of the project management occupation.

Wilensky observed that a "… major barrier to the professionalization of many occupations … is the nature and structure of their base of knowledge and doctrine" (Wilensky, 1964, p. 148) where professional jurisdiction is defined by unique and specific knowledge. As such, the state of development of the broad knowledge base for the occupation may be problematic in defining project management as a profession.

A PROJECT MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY

Within project management, a market exists where knowledge is created, shared, modified, framed and diffused, similar to other management fields (Roberts, 2010). This market facilitates ongoing systemic relevance and improvement in order to provide an "… overall system of production of management knowledge" (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001, p. 934). In this knowledge market a broad community exists where a variety of actors function in both competitive and complimentary ways and, like other management fields "…it is not uncommon for members of the management knowledge field to participate in several of the groups simultaneously" (Roberts, 2010, p. 115). Actors in the Project Management Knowledge Community (PMKC) can include project management academics, universities, publishers, membership associations, consultants, certifying bodies and project managers who produce, consume and disseminate ideas. These actors may also be brokers of knowledge, engaging other actors, spanning boundaries, creating tension, and engaging actors who "…resist the introduction of new knowledge when it has the potential to undermine the expertise of members, despite the efforts of brokers" (Roberts, 2011, p. 121). A summary of the information about the knowledge community adapted from Roberts (2010) is depicted in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

ACADEMICS, UNIVERSITIES, PUBLISHERS AND CONSULTANTS

In the Project Management Knowledge Community (PMKC) academics may be viewed as a primary producer of knowledge with their influence stemming from research, publishing and teaching. The research concentrated on four project management oriented journal publications as the representative source of research and a conduit toward advancement in the development of project management as a profession. The publications reviewed were: the International Journal of Project Management (IJPM); Project Management Journal (PMJ); the International Journal of Managing Projects in Business (IJMPIB); and the International Journal of Project Organisation and Management

(IJPOM). Together, these project management focused journals form a significant engine for project management knowledge diffusion.

Consultants broadly "…compete in a race to define which management techniques lead rational management progress" (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 255). In the project management knowledge market consultants play a role of producers and broad diffusers of project management knowledge. Consultants may also create further diffusion through work with their clients, often translating research on their projects to practitioners. Consultants also become a conduit for project management knowledge, as they do in other managerial specialties, with rapid diffusion of valuable innovations, as well as less efficient ones. Unlike academics, the consulting process is less collaborative on ideas but offers expeditious and efficient diffusion of knowledge through their clients. Such speed in the diffusion of ideas may also contribute to the effective management of projects through temporary activities. Consuming managers may generate their own knowledge derived from exposure to, and use of, consultants and "…serve as a technical learning process" (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 255). Such exposure and practice-based learning can provide faster feedback to the consultant and advance ahead a tested innovation and further knowledge.

Consultants are also commercially motivated in their role as diffusers of project management ideas, motivating them to learn from ideas tested in practice. Consultants may bring commercially tested ideas which meet perceived needs and diffuse management 'fads' and 'fashion' to project managers. While the inference of the terms 'fad' and 'fashion', from popular design, fashion and entertainment are pejorative, such fads and fashions are not trivial. Management 'fashion' is often influenced by societal norms, understanding that "Norms of managerial progress are societal expectations that, over time, managers will use new and improved management techniques" (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 257). Consultants may experience a mix of outcomes with practitioners including acceptance and rejection, as well as something in between. Such swift diffusion and feedback may serve as a valuable link in evaluating understanding, relevance and acceptance of emerging knowledge by project managers.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP ASSOCIATIONS

Professional project management organizations provide a dominant role in the diffusion of knowledge through an extensive membership. Professional membership follows two main streams with different approaches and geographical centres: the global Project Management Institute (PMI) model and the federation of local organizations affiliated with the International Project Management Association (IPMA). Both models have increased their presence in multiple countries beginning from bases in the USA (PMI) and from UK/Europe (IPMA) respectively, with different approaches to structure, influence and control.

PMI is the largest membership group in the world with an organizational model which generally has replicated local groups as it has expanded, and may be described as somewhat global and flat in structure. The reported membership of PMI in 2013 includes members from 180 countries and exceeds 400,000 (Project Management Institute, 2013), up from 287,000 in 2008 (Project Management Institute, 2008), and 100,000 in 2003. In addition, PMI claims to have granted over 600,000 certifications (Project Management Institute, 2013) in addition to other member services.

The IPMA federation is headquartered in the Netherlands, having 55 national project management associations with 120,000 members in the UK, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and North and South America (International Project Management Association, 2015). IPMA member associations issue their own standards and certifications which are both coordinated within IPMA and broadly similar to the PMI standards.

While these associations have developed bodies of knowledge (BOKs) and certification regimes which are similar, there is competition for membership and leadership, and local and global adoption of their doctrines. Adoption of research-led innovations varies between these dominant groups according to their own needs, processes, orientations and views. This creates tension and contributes to differences in relevant BOKs and the advancement of project management innovation (Morris et al., 2006).

The cumulative effect of differences in the orientation and approaches of actors in the PMKC leads to variance in what is emphasized, researched, published, taught and shared. Such differences in perspectives, motivations and interests leads to divergence in the way people, pathways and power shape the nature of project management knowledge and ultimately, project management practices.

DEVELOPMENT AND DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE AND UBIQUITY

Over the last three decades analysis of project management research papers, which observed changes in the subject types and how well articles were constructed, have been published in leading project management journals. First, focal project management issues were viewed from the initial decade of IJPM publication (1983-1992) (Betts & Lansley, 1995). Next, attention to `Body of Knowledge' topics were examined (1984-1998) in IJPM (Themistocleous & Wearne, 2000). More recently, a review was conducted of publication quality; rigor; inclusion of citations of research from other fields; citations of project management research included in non-project management journals; coverage of breadth of research topics; and improved methodology comparing data in 1987, 1997 and 2007 (Turner, 2010). Taken together, these three articles document maturation in sophistication of journal publications, and a shift away from practitioner dominated discourse and toward more thoroughly researched academic work. In addition, shifts in the type of areas examined by researchers and published in the journals demonstrate an expanded scope of subjects. Overall, the authors documented significant change in quality and innovation through a shift from traditional PMI knowledge area topics toward 'other' areas of research. It might be thought that the stream of research-based concepts would represent creative and healthy momentum adding to the research universe. If the on-flow represented increased exploration and debate, and perhaps accelerated knowledge distribution, it could indicate an 'adopt and adapt' mindset and a vibrant diffusion system. Conceptually, the momentum of the flow of research would continue unabated, serving the needs of the entire project management community, influencing and changing practice at a rapid pace. In reality, the PMKC is perhaps less efficient. Research may likely have been influenced by many stakeholders and constant review (Shepherd & Atkinson, 2011). The PMKC may also be loosely

guided by identified gaps in literature, researcher interest, fashion, and agendas developed by funders of research, and the vested interests of those in power to select publication content.

The dominance of the PMI/IPMA/APM BOKs and ties to contemporary training and occupational certification for thousands of members also creates barriers to incorporating new thought within this complex and interdependent system (Shepherd & Atkinson, 2011). While stability and control lead to more predictable outcomes, strong agency and isomorphic effects present challenges to innovation and the advancement of knowledge in a relatively young discipline. The systemic effect of the dominance of BOKs requires project management knowledge producers to better understand the realities and possible inertia of the status quo. Any review of the BOKs needs balance to recognize how they have contributed to the growth of the project management discipline where the "…rational codes, beliefs and methods…" (Clegg & Courpasson, 2004) enabled the successful growth of project management globally. The strength and simplicity of standardized BOKs may now present barriers to the speed of change, as there may be some reduction in the advancement and diffusion of the full range of knowledge.

Tensions generated between and among actors in the PMKC are evident in the evolution of content in the professional associations' BOKs. The knowledge formally organized into published BOKs by professional associations is considered less agile than hoped by many researchers (Morris et al., 2006). Attention and resources have not been the core problem to update the BOKs. The practitioner-view centred BOKs have been updated about once every five years and considerable resources have been committed by professional associations. Regular updates of BOKs can not only diffuse new techniques but also maintain an image of contemporary knowledge. Updates over the last few years have been widely published, and include PMI (2013) and the APM (2012) and demonstrates currency of knowledge from the view of the professional associations. As the professional associations' BOK updates are managed through committees backed by the dominant voice of practitioner membership from the professional associations, progress may not meet expectations of those wishing for rapid change and agility to support a broader audience. Significant control of content is vested in practitioners, certification providers and training providers. The result is

BOKs that are limited and unable to fully represent the project management discipline (Shepherd & Atkinson, 2011).

The perception of the BOK as universal by actors is, in reality, a much more narrowly focused process-oriented tool. This creates an inconsistency compared to the profession of accounting where 'Generally Accepted Accounting Principles' from the USA are not best practice, rather are part of a range of tools (Morris et al., 2006). This approach institutionalized by PMI, APM, and similar organizations has also codified some existing knowledge and techniques as mainstream and represents knowledge in project management. Across the extended international project management practitioner community the BOKs have brought benefits of increased harmonization of expectations, behaviors, competencies and performance and a professional image. As the most visible offering by PMI, IPMA, APM and the like, BOKs project authority, sophistication and vibrancy.

As the PMKC generates, influences, limits and regulates the development and transfer of knowledge it may be visualized as an interconnected system where information and knowledge flows to, from, and through its actors in a market of information. This system may also be viewed as a discipline process, vetting new ideas for relevance and logic to ensure considered adoption. Logical as that approach may be, there is a need for candour in order to continue to perform roles of credible knowledge producers and distributors as the reality may produce leads and lags across the PMKC. Project management academics, researchers and editors must seek to advance knowledge in a market environment both cooperatively and in competition, as no one actor or group has exclusive control of knowledge. In order to understand the journey from practice-oriented research which leads to opportunities in an expanded range of subjects, a bibliographic study was conducted to examine where research emphasis has been and might travel.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The primary purpose of the bibliographic research was to capture and analyse discourse in project management focused academic journals to identify topics related to knowledge diffusion in the global project management community. Keywords are author-indicators of content of journal articles

and, as such, should be strong pointers to assess author intent. Keywords, per se, are an increasingly common technique to allow identification of journal publications for discovery to enable others to find and read sought after research. Keyword content provides a platform to construct a view of the nature of research that was emerging recently, and post Turner's (2010) review of published research in project management. In reviewing the bibliographic data for this study, it was determined that details of papers such as keywords would be examined and compared. Examining recent articles regarding the professional issues for project managers, compared to other project management subject areas, provides perspective in the research regarding subjects chosen to be published. Given the issues raised by Turner (2010) regarding the state of project management publication and potential lag-time for a response to the observations, project management literature emerging in 2012 and 2013 was determined to be representative of contemporary thought.

Organizing the publications involved developing a process to extract and categorize key information. Project management journal publications, as natural and historical evidence of the state of interest in research subjects, provides an indication of actual decisions about what gets published. Articles to analyze were gathered through a variety of electronic library sources, and were assembled for analysis as a data set. The information captured excluded editorials or book reviews. There were 43 issues in the combined publications with 306 articles captured. These papers contained a total of 2,079 keywords, believed to be an accurate source of describing the content of the article. These keywords were the core determinant in identifying research subject-types as a representative voice of the work published by authors. Keyword information was the primary focus on data organization as keywords reflect the identifying concepts in publishing the article and all of the selected journals contained such information. Keywords could also be sorted into similar groupings, thus creating initial sorting codes allowing for further analysis. Using articles selected from 2012 and 2013 allowed for the capture of multi-year data and was adjusted for differences in individual publication frequency within any particular year. The resulting output was analyzed for patterns to identify frequency of themes in publications. Figure 1 below maps the data acquisition and organization.

ANALYSIS

The keyword data analysis results indicated that much of the publication activity, through examining 1,270 keywords (61%) focused on traditional PMI knowledge areas and other research closely aligned, indicating a majority of the keywords were closely linked to core project management subjects. Perhaps surprisingly, a significant number related to 'other' subjects, are reflective of organizational and social issues. Given the calls for research to relate to subject areas not of historical focus in project management (Winter & Smith, 2006) it is perhaps an indication of some research investment in new areas.

The literature was further examined to understand the visibility of professionalism in project management journals. Only 22 keywords related directly to professionalism in terms such as: profession; communities of practice and expertise; learning; training; and skills, demonstrating a low profile in the literature. Perhaps showing a positive sign, 70 keywords related to: data; information; knowledge; and wisdom, which was first termed by Ackoff (1989) using the acronym 'DIKW'. DIKW has recently been included in the PMBOK® indicating adoption by PMI (2013).

CONCLUSION

Project management professional associations bring the benefit of standardized approaches through their individual and different 'Body of Knowledge' BOK documents. This standardization leads to training and certifications aligned to their specific BOKs for members, guiding them in loosely aligned work. The process orientation and dominance of ways embodied in the different BOKs also limits new ways of thinking. This can result in difficulty incorporating new knowledge, delaying application of project management to new types of projects and in different industry types, and more reflective thinking. As a result, new information is incorporated slowly, not at all, or with great debate, thus limiting the advance of professionalization within project management. The professional association BOKs are not truly full professional 'bodies of knowledge' as applied to the

traditional professions. Naming a BOK is therefore misleading, creating confusion and misunderstanding about the full extent of knowledge within project management. Research into how to better convey a broadened definition of project management knowledge would aid in the professionalization of this occupation.

This study examined discourse regarding professionalization within project management journals through an analysis of over 2,000 keywords from four publications over a two year period (2013 to 2014). The frequency of keywords relating to professionalization was rare (1%). In the data there also appears a reasonable amount of research relating to subject areas considered less developed within the dominant PMBOK® documents central to accepted project management knowledge. While the growth in membership and the successful adoption of the various BOKs is a matter of record, given some of the limitations generated it may be too constraining to the generation of new knowledge and acceptance of project management as a profession.

Within project management, a market exists where knowledge is created, shared, modified, framed, and diffused through a Project Management Knowledge Community (PMKC). The new information generated and diffused by this community constitutes a systematic approach to producing management knowledge, improving relevance broadening and increasing the adaptation and adoption of knowledge. It can also serve as the guiding community to develop the full body of knowledge for project management, fulfilling the role to advance professionalization. To accomplish this mission and serve a wide audience, publications should be more open to areas of research beyond the traditional knowledge areas. This would not only serve the general interests of the entire occupation but also provide leadership and a voice beyond the practitioner-dominated professional associations. This can allow the professional associations to serve as implementers of a broad professionalization scheme, retaining the important role of their BOKs and serve as a forum to expand the project management field.

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Table 1. Project Management Knowledge Market Community Actors

Individual and Group Actors	Producers	Consumers	Diffusers	Promoters
Project Management Academics	X	X	X (academic market)	
Universities	X	X	X (primarily students)	
Publishers			X (broad)	
Consultants	X	X	X (broad)	X
Membership Organizations		X	X	
Project Managers		X	X	

Adapted from Roberts 2010

Figure 1: Methodology steps for bibliographic data acquisition and organization

Step 1: Identify Ranked Academic Journals in PM, 2012-2013	→	Step 2: Copy key information from Journal website onto word document	→	Step 3: Transpose key information onto excel worksheet
Step 6: Analyse results for patterns by category, publication, other.	←	Step 5: Identify and code paper subject by accepted PMI Knowledge Area or necessary additional codes	←	Step 4: Identify and code author affiliations by unique or combination geography