Current Trends in Project Management Research

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review the available literature on the current trends in project management research. In order to do this, open source articles from Google Scholar were used. An attempt was made to select studies spanning several decades, from the 1950's to present to obtain an overview of how the field has evolved and how trends have developed. Using a set of criteria, approximately 600 scholarly works were initially analysed and then reduced to a smaller number which were explored in detail. Like other fields, project management research has grown and evolved over the decades. A dynamic and evolving field, it has gone through phases of emphasising strictly on certain aspects such as planning and control, to developing a holistic understanding of the subject. This has meant incorporating the various aspects of the project cycle into project management research. This indicates that research in this field has encompassed the several themes that may form a part of it. However, an underlying assumption in project management research is that project management itself stays the same across industries or sectors and despite the strides made in this field of research, there is scope to diversify and analyse its interconnection and influence on other disciplines as well.

Keywords: Project management, project management research, trends in project management

Introduction

In order to study the trends that have developed over the decades in project management research, it may be helpful to first understand what is meant by project management. Packendorff (1995) states that a project may be characterised as being 'a given, playable and unique task, limited in time, complex in implementation and subject to evaluation' (1995:320). Project management, then, may be understood as 'directing and coordinating human and material resources throughout the life of a project by using modern management techniques to achieve predetermined objectives of scope, time, quality and participant satisfaction' (Packendorff, 1995:320). Following this definition, it has further been suggested that project management may be undertaken by dividing projects into phases of initiation, definition, design, development, implementation and follow up (Baars, 2006).

Like other fields, project management research has grown and evolved over the decades. Perhaps one of the most significant changes has been noted as the shift 'from single projects to programs, portfolios, temporary organisations, etc' (Drouin, Müller, & Sankaran, 2013:22). Another significant shift has been towards 'transnationalism' that Gemuenden and Schoper (2015) equate with the increase in the globalisation of work and hence, of the workforce and practitioners. Not only has this influenced project management research but has also had a bearing on the challenges that the field faces (Gemuenden & Schoper, 2015). This review seeks to track the evolution of this field of research while also analysing the future trends in it.

In the following sections, the search conducted will be explained followed by the findings of the review and what the various studies reveal about the trends in project management research. This will be followed by a conclusion that will sum up the arguments and discuss the scope for future interventions and research.

Methodology

In order to find relevant research studies specific terms were used in Google Scholar. These were the following

- Trends in project management research

- Project management + evolution

- Project management research

- Project management research + trends

- Innovations + project management research

- Developments in project management research

For each individual search term, 100 results were considered, for a total of 600 results. For these, an initial examination was conducted, using research studies spanning several decades, from the 1950's to present. This was in order to develop an overview of the trends in project management research and to understand how it has evolved over the years. The 1950's was also the decade when project management emerged as a theoretical field (Packendorff, 1995). There was also an attempt to find research papers that would provide case study examples to better evaluate the contributing factors for change and evolution. Since academic literature around this area of research was scarce, grey literature was also reviewed such as reports from organisations and white papers.

Results

In the 1950's, project management emerged as a theoretical field largely focusing on the principles of planning and was influenced by the work of Kurt Lewin and his planned approach to change management. However, this evolved in the 1980's with the incorporation of 'research concerning organisation theory, human resource management and leadership' (Packendorff, 1995:321). This coincided with the introduction of computers in the workforce and a critique of the preoccupation with planning in project management. Hence, there was a shift from the core concepts that came to be synonymous with project management research, namely 'life-cycle planning, risk analysis and project evaluation' (Packendorff, 1995:322).

One of the biggest changes that came about in the field of project management research, argues Packendorff (1995), was in the 1980's when a need was felt to incorporate the knowledge of researchers and practitioners while also attempting to structure the discipline. Additionally, the existing approach to project management was criticised for assuming that 'organisations operate in a stable environment' while ignoring the role of power and the influence of leadership within an organisation (Drouin, Müller, & Sankaran, 2013:8). Hence, the 1990's and 2000's ushered in a period of drawing attention to the value of adopting a bottom-up approach and cooperative change which would 'involve leading people, managing the resistance to change, communicating about change, and fostering the participation of employees in the change process' (Drouin, Müller, & Sankaran, 2013:8).

This is echoed in Biggins, Lawlor-Wright and Truelove's extensive trend analysis research which found that even while reviewing the research around project management, emphasis was on the planning aspect of it until the 1970's. This shifted, according to them in the 1970's and

1980's to a focus on project execution and control. Following this, in the 2000's, the trend of personal development gained traction, with an additional emphasis on themes of soft skill development, risk management, stakeholder management and project evaluation. Hence, there is an understanding of the need to widen the aspects that encompass project management. A need was felt to fully incorporate the various components of the project lifecycle into project management research. This period is also marked by an increase in emphasis on standardisation and certifications by project management practitioners. This may be attributed to the growing complexity of projects owing to the increasing size of the project as well as the number of stakeholders involved in it (Gemuenden & Schoper, 2015). Additionally, Gemuenden and Schoper (2015) contend that globalisation and international project management meant that standardisation was required to ensure consistency of processes and services. The impact of new technology therefore, cannot be underestimated with regard to project management as it allowed for and enabled 'efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and scalability of project management' (Gemuenden & Schoper, 2015:12). Lastly, they describe project management research as a trend as well, resulting from an increased focus on 'the amount of publications (and) citations' coupled with 'the amount of research grants… devoted to project management research' which they anticipate will only increase in the coming years (Gemuenden & Schoper, 2015:25).

From the research thus far it is evident that project management research has been a dynamic field, adapting to changes and incorporating learnings from practitioners and researchers. In terms of the new and emerging trends in project management research, Tse (2009) contends that there are several schools of thought on what the future trends may be. This includes Christophe N Bredillet's 2008 study that seeks to define project management in a way that encompasses governance, marketing, behaviour, contingency, success, optimisation, modelling, decision and process as the nine schools of thought. This is so that the link between project management research and other disciplines can be better understood and studied. For example, the interconnection and influence of project management on disciplines such as marketing (Tse, 2009). Lastly, it should be mentioned here that Packendorff (1995) argues that while project management research 'has become a scientific field in its own right', project management has become a generic concept (Packendorff, 1995:324). This, he explains, is because the innovation in this field has come at the expense of 'creativity in projects' and the fact that 'general theories on organisation' omit 'characteristics of any deviant individual organisations or groups of organisations, in order to attain universal applicability' (Packendorff, 1995:324). He therefore recommends 'empirical studies of what is actually taking place in project organisations' to build on practical advice and academic knowledge so as to improve the field while at the same time avoiding project mismanagement (Packendorff, 1995:325).

Discussion and Conclusion

The field of project management research has been shaped by the theories underpinning it as well as the inputs from practitioners and researchers. This has allowed the area to be dynamic and the research has evolved over the decades. It has come a long way from a strict focus on planning to the changes brought about by new technologies, globalisation and international project management. Yet, there is still scope for expansion and innovation. This is because in the face of challenges and the evolving nature of research, project management research will also have to adapt to stay relevant while also attracting good researchers (Gemuenden & Schoper, 2015). One of the suggestions to meet address these concerns is made by Tse (2009) who contends that the field must interact with other disciplines in order to understand how it is

applied and modified when used to suit other sectors. This stems from an understanding that the same model of project management cannot be implemented in every discipline; far from what was first understood in the 1950's. Drouin, Müller and Sankaran (2013) even suggest that in order to invigorate the field of project management research, learnings from similar disciplines, such as change management may be incorporated. This, they argue is so that it can become more dynamic and grow as a discipline; while staying true to its roots of planning, risk management, stakeholder interest, etc, 'also integrate more sensitive and strategic approaches in conducting research' (Drouin, Müller and Sankaran 2013:15). This requires incorporating 'the human dimensions of change' which would include engaging more not just with stakeholders but also with diverse practitioners in order to define the vision and change process (Drouin, Müller and Sankaran 2013:15). Additionally, Packendorff (1995) highlights that even though project management research may have developed and become quite sophisticated over the decades, this does not imply that the learnings are being applied and put into practice as intended. Hence, in order for project management research to prevent stagnation while continuing to be dynamic and adaptive to the changes in the industry, there is a need for research to ensure that it includes learnings from other sectors, explores the interlinkages between project management and other disciplines as well as incorporate aspects of project mismanagement to serve the practitioners in the field.

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