CONFERENCE PAPER

A Cross-Section of Papers from IRNOP 2017 – Boston

Stephen A. Leybourne

Boston University, United States. sleyb@bu.edu

The International Research Network on Organizing by Projects (IRNOP) 2017 was held in Boston, Massachusetts, in June of 2017. As a part of that conference, presenters were offered the opportunity to have their peer-reviewed conference papers published in the *Project Management Research & Practice* journal. This section is publishing those papers, which offer interesting and contemporary perspectives on a number of challenging areas in project management.

PMRP prides itself on considering projects and project-based management from a sustainable viewpoint, and the first paper, by Sabini, Muzio and Alderman, discusses the challenges of integrating sustainability into PM practices from an institutional perspective, using qualitative data to assess how professional associations are engaging with the sustainability imperative. The paper uses a framework of 'pillars' – regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive – to consider how the management of projects is being influenced by a sustainable ethos and how PM educators and communities of practice are acting as 'regulatory agents' for change.

Another issue that has been emerging in the PM literature for some time now is that of complexity and how emerging issues add layers of complexity to what were originally perceived as projects that were more straightforward. The second paper published here, by Bowman and Crawford, considers the shift from a more conventional control theory perspective towards sense-making and reframing through storytelling to assist in resolving issues that emerge as a result of the dynamic and emergent nature of projects.

This paper suggests that the rational, linear model of PM is essentially unworkable for most projects, and it uses qualitative data to build an argument for a more nuanced, emergent view of PM where learning from storytelling can benefit the modern, complex project. The authors offer the Storytelling Diamond model as a way to assist in effective delivery.

The third paper, by Shalbafan, Leigh, Pollack and Sankaran, also looks at the issue of complexity in the project domain and considers the impact of real-time events on managers during decision-making processes for project portfolio management in areas of significant complexity, using a purpose-built simulation informed by the Cynefin framework.

The paper suggests that project portfolios get exposed to unexpected change events in their decision-making, and that project portfolio management has already been a competitive advantage for both service and manufacturing industries as it facilitates communication with internal and external stakeholders to assist with effective decision-making in complex scenarios. Mechanisms such as engagements with decision makers' emotions, teamwork practices and diversifications are identified as procedures that help practitioners to tackle real-time events during decision-making.

Complexity in the project domain leads to innovation, and the next paper in this collection, by Brasil, Gomes, Salerno and de Paula, considers innovation at the strategic level, at the innovation portfolio level, and at the project level, and at how integration between these three levels can assist the organization. The authors lead from the premise that this environment is characterized by sequential, irreversible investments being made under conditions of uncertainty, which certainly sounds like the project domain to me. The paper uses the Real Options approach to consider four cases of organizations in Brazil, and offers some useful theoretical and practical findings.

Another paper that embraces thinking differently is the paper by Forte and Kloppenborg, which advocates the benefits of an "agile mindset" in managing projects. This paper is fundamentally focused towards the practitioner and takes the view that adopting some of the iterative concepts of agile PM can assist with the delivery of more traditional projects. It is proposed in this paper that within any project three fundamental elements are important: satisfying the customer, engaging the team and simplifying things as much as possible.

In order to offer something to help with practitioner application, the Agile Manifesto is refocused to be applicable to a broader project field, and mapped onto the customer, team and simplification imperatives within the project. The authors propose that the outcomes of this exercise, validated by a modest survey, will assist practitioners.

Following on from the logic of improving project delivery, the sixth paper in this section, by Oshikoji, addresses how to aggregate this increased performance into organization and industry-level insight. The paper argues that performance measurement should be about quantifying both the efficiency and the effectiveness of actions, and considers how the 10–10 system reports this within the Norwegian construction sector.

This collection continues with a paper that considers estimating and how accurate estimations are at the point of project completion. This paper, by Nannini, Warburton and de Marco, uses the Gompertz function within an earned value framework to predict both project duration and the accuracy of cost estimates at the completion of the project. The paper contributes significantly to demonstrating that this quantitative approach is stable, accurate and reliable, and offers practical guidance for the practitioner.

The second paper with this theme, by Narbaev and de Marco, proposes a theoretical model that looks at cost contingency in order to assist in forecasting risk-adjusted cost estimates at

the completion of the project. The paper is a contribution to bridging the gap between earned value management and cost contingency management, and as such, it provides the project manager with a model to consider how differing risk attitudes impact upon cost estimates at the completion of the project.

The final paper in this limited collection from IRNOP 2017 looks across three linked areas that are all topical at this moment. Supply chain, megaprojects, and project success factors are all of great interest to both the academic and the practitioner project community, and Radujković and Mišić explore elements of supply chain management within the megaproject domain and identify the ones that have significant influence on project performance. Interestingly, the authors make the point that megaprojects are important for the development of emerging economies, bringing us back to one of the imperatives driving the development of the *Project Management Research & Practice* journal.

Steve Leybourne
Associate Editor of PMRP
Co-chair – IRNOP 2017