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## Bridging the practitioner-academic divide

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Project Management (PM) is a dynamic and fast-evolving management discipline that has experienced significant growth and acceptance over the last few decades. As the field transitions from its engineering and construction origins, it has become a more generally applicable management discipline relevant to all manner of business organizations.

At least, that is my personal perspective of the field, and as I have spent my entire career working on projects, it seems self-evident to me—no referencing necessary. Writing as a consultant or industry thought-leader, I could legitimately move on to more insightful, if not well-substantiated, thoughts about the state of PM. However, as an academic, I am uneasy and want to find some references to justify even these introductory statements. So right there, in the first paragraph, we encounter the practitioner-academic divide. But more on that later.

What provides evidence of the growth of the PM discipline is the increasing membership in professional associations, with the Project Management Institute (PMI) now reaching over half a million members globally (PMI 2017a). This is combined with studies predicting a growth in demand for PM professionals that is expected to reach 33% in the next decade (PMI 2017b). This trajectory has resulted in PM becoming an established course in many universities and tertiary institutions as graduates are trained to fill the jobs of the future. And as a result, there is an increasing need for engagement between PM academics and practitioners – especially when combined with the research interests in this burgeoning management field.

Academics effectively play twin roles: they are at once researchers acquiring knowledge, and educators imparting that knowledge to students. Although balancing these roles can result in an uneasy tension about which aspect to prioritize, they are both better served by a rich interaction

with the practitioner base. Where poor engagement between practitioners and researchers can limit the quality and relevance of research, it becomes more problematic when universities are also responsible for training students – potentially educating them on impractical theories.

Interactions between academics and practitioners should form a virtuous cycle combining research, knowledge sharing and the education of future generations of project professionals. The study and understanding of how projects are managed in the wild can then be distilled into knowledge that is used to educate students better and prepare them with the skills and capabilities required by society. Practitioners deliver the projects that change our world, whereas researchers develop the theoretical foundations that offer insights into PM practices, with students learning about their real-world application and acting as accelerants, bringing new energy and enthusiasm to the profession.

That is good in theory anyway. The reality, as often is the case, can be a little different.

Left to their own devices, PM practitioners and academics tend to separate into insular communities that are content to work independently of each other. With limited interactions between the two camps, an underlying suspicion can emerge that discounts the value of each other's perspective. Such a disconnect between research and practice is not new, nor is it limited to PM. The (academic) management literature has lamented the situation and discussed the challenge of bridging the practitioner-academic divide (Lilien 2011; McNatt, Glassman & Glassman 2010). The sentiment is captured in this quote:

The big problem with management science models is that managers practically never use them. There have been a few applications, of course, but the practice is a pallid picture of the promise. (Little 1970)

Although PM practitioners may not agree that practice represents the “pallid picture” described by Little, personal observations and discussions with both practitioners and academics confirm that such a divide exists and hinders information exchange between the parties. And though each of us has a unique story to illustrate the different biases at play, the issue deserves more exposure in the PM domain. So, in the interests of greater understanding of the different perspectives of each camp, I recount here my personal experiences (see Personal Perspective on page 5). It was these experiences, after all, which led me, as Chair of the Inaugural Academic Program at the Project Management Institute Australia Conference (PMIAC17), to introduce the Call for Papers as follows:

As a management discipline based upon execution and delivery, PM professionals are more likely to be influenced by the experiences of their industry peers and press than any formal research findings. It is interesting to ponder:

How many project managers read research papers on the subject?

There can be a disconnect between researchers looking to contribute to improving PM practices, and PM professionals working at the coalface. Similarly, PM educators responsible for developing the next generation of project professionals can benefit from the real-world experience of PM practitioners and closer links to industry.

The PMIAC17 Academic Program aims to provide a forum where academics and practitioners can exchange views and explore opportunities to collaborate on meaningful research. The end result will improve the quality and relevance of PM research while exposing practitioners to the frontiers of PM knowledge.

Achieving the virtuous cycle described earlier requires a catalyst to help these otherwise siloed groups forge the necessary relationships that can help advance the burgeoning PM profession. This is where professional bodies have a significant role to play, connecting their membership of PM professionals with the academics seeking to understand the real-world complexities of the discipline better. PMI has globally championed this cause, and the six Australian PMI chapters initiated the Academic Outreach National Project in 2016 with the goal to improve engagement between practitioners and academia. Engagement best practices were identified, developed and shared, as different chapters had varying degrees of interaction with local PM academics. Our focus and hope were that PMIAC17 could be the meeting point where all stakeholders in the Australian PM community could connect with one another and actively engage in building bridges.

The PMI Academic Group was key to the success of that mission, as it agreed to run its regional workshop for PM educators as a part of PMIAC17's Academic Program. The PMI Global Accreditation Centre's team, responsible for the accreditation of PM degree programs worldwide, invited academics from universities across Australia and subsidized their attendance at the conference. The first day of the Academic Program comprised presentations on Best Practices for PM Degree Programs, and panel discussions on topics including Establishing Industry Involvement in PM Programs and Working with Student Capstone Projects.

The second day of the PMIAC17's Academic Program comprised presentations of research papers. These were selected following a double-blind review process undertaken by academics and supported by PMI volunteers who coordinated and administered the reviews using the ExOrdo submissions management tool. The nine papers published in this Special Issue of the *Project Management Research and Practice* journal represent the PMIAC17 proceedings.

Social network analysis (SNA) proved to be a vibrant area of PM research, with three papers from Kenneth Chung's research team at the University of Sydney. It was pleasing that these papers were co-authored with young PM academics, with the paper by [Fares, Chung, Passey, Longman and Valenijn \(2017\)](#) applying SNA techniques to an integrated healthcare project and examining the stakeholder interactions in order to gain insights that help improve the delivery of health services. This collaboration between researchers and healthcare professionals shows the potential of new SNA techniques, which [Anichenko, Chung and Crawford \(2017\)](#) propose to apply to the PM domain itself. They provide a literature review to underpin a study of project team interactions that may potentially be able to predict project performance. To complete the theme, [Chung and Du \(2017\)](#) study influence and engagement in a project and propose that SNA techniques can complement the traditional static approaches of stakeholder analysis and could offer useful measures of stakeholder engagement during project execution.

Different aspects of project organizations were covered by a further three papers, with [Hadjinicolaou, Dumrak and Mostafa \(2017\)](#) reporting on their quantitative research based on a survey of project portfolio managers and look for correlations between portfolio sizes and the adoption of PPM practices. [Ranasinghe, Gharai and Gilbert \(2017\)](#) provide a literature review to support their argument for adopting a PM methodology in the Australian local government context characterized by increased outsourcing that reduces technical expertise but increases the reliance on project management. To round out the project organizations theme, [Liu and Chen \(2017\)](#) consider longitudinal data from a construction business to investigate the how a project-based organization scales its business and the relationship this may have to project size and delivery risk.

Efficiencies in mining projects were the focus of two papers, with [Skerman and Todhunter \(2017\)](#) providing the background and literature review to support a study into an appropriate framework that can improve project outcomes in the Australian coal-mining industry. Meanwhile, [Milanzi and Bond-Barnard \(2017\)](#) describe the results of a qualitative study exploring the challenges and implications of centralized procurement on projects in South African mining organizations.

Finally, these proceedings come to a fitting close with [Kenley and Harfield \(2017\)](#) looking at the transfer of PM knowledge in Open Standards projects which see academics actively engaged as “practitioners” and supplying the lessons learned. The blurring of roles evident in this paper is a timely reminder that the practitioner-academic divide is not the dichotomy it first appears. This is especially true of PM knowledge where the ubiquity of projects means that academics may also be required to be practicing project managers for certain initiatives.

The richness of PM lies in the fact that everyone knows something about how projects work, but we also know we can do a much better job delivering them. So it will not be unusual to find ourselves applying both practitioner and academic perspectives concurrently, operating at both ends of the “divide” depending on the task we are performing. And with that realization, there seems little to prevent academics and practitioners from coming together to advance the art, and develop the science of Project Management.

## Personal Perspective

I conclude this discussion of the roles, or perceptions, of PM practitioners and academics with a personal perspective of my career - as what might be termed a “pracademic.” I had been a project professional with over 15 years of industry experience when I commenced my Ph.D. studies, and the interaction on both sides of the practitioner-academic divide has allowed me to observe what are some apparently common views regarding research.

A major portion of my career has involved in the adoption, evangelizing and – less ennobling – the marketing and sales of services relating to what could loosely be termed PM best practice. This involved positioning the wares of a well-known IT company in the business, as having some critical technologies or knowledge that was not freely available to others and which could only be shared as part of a purchase or consulting engagement. Executing the sale involved setting up certain individuals as gurus on a specific topic, who would then publish whitepapers for the company and do the rounds giving special lectures and workshops. For my sins, I was such a “manufactured guru” who was promoted and wheeled out by the marketing team to instruct major clients and advise sales prospects on the benefits of our solution. Long before my Ph.D. was completed, I always believed that I had some valuable experiences and even knowledge to share – but it was really not necessary and optional in the role.

Yet, the carefully constructed presentations, glossy marketing brochures and, more recently, engaging websites are what represent knowledge in the business world. I realized this clearly when the marketing team began to create their own material devoid of any input from any subject matter experts in the company. I became increasingly uncomfortable when the names of techniques and whole practices could be changed to provide some differentiation from a competitor’s offerings or to give the appearance of something new and innovative. The resulting Tower of Babel was not of major concern to businesses, whether vendor or customer, as it merely meant that there could be product comparisons created which gave the illusion of market analysis with detailed comparison charts that guided the cognoscenti to make the best decision for their business.

Knowledge (like alternative facts) can be made up, packaged and distributed as a by-product of a marketing campaign – and then be forgotten and replaced just as quickly. This artificial, “latest thing” knowledge does not have to wait for any real discovery or progress, it only requires an understanding of the customers pain-points and a clever catch-phrase or product name which promises to address it. Add a compelling campaign which attracts prospective customers and a charismatic account manager who targets key dates in the purchasing cycle (around the tax year), and you have a winning sales formula.

That is what any burgeoning market can lead to a frenzy of marketing activity that serves only to confuse and confound the industry. And while there are apparently good people, like my younger self, working and learning in such organizations, the business goals are not driven by knowledge acquisition, so it will be the best sales campaign or team that wins the day (or more appropriately, the customer) rather than the march of knowledge.

What is disconcerting and indeed disturbing, is that the marketing hype works so well.

Armed with the latest, cleverly crafted buzz-words and with the help of marketing budgets that enable generously catered seminars and industry networking events, consultants and technology vendors can get the attention of practitioners, or more importantly, the decision-makers in any organization they target. Sophisticated presentations focus on key roles in the organization to make clear the relevance of the solution proffered – to the CEO, the CTO, the CFO and even the humble practitioner who is necessary to punch in the original information. With clearly stated benefits, customer case studies and return-on-investment calculators for the adoption of the solution, you can sense the power that the marketer can wield with their weapons of mass-deception. At its worst, this is fake-knowledge creation on an industrial scale, and it presents a clear challenge to academia.

Becoming disenchanted with my role as an industry thought-leader, I attempted to redeem myself and chose to do a mature-age Ph.D. I undertook research on a problem-area I had previously identified working as a Test Manager in a large telecommunications organization. My attempts at penance proved to be somewhat naïve, and my idealistic aim of creating *true knowledge* through academic research soon hit some obstacles.

So as not to risk demoralizing any prospective academics or bore the reader, I will summarize my research challenges as follows:

1. There was simply no literature that discussed the real-world issue, as researchers did not yet thoroughly understand the problem. This necessitated a change in my thesis topic to study a related problem area that academics recognized.
2. Attempts to collect data from practitioners required applying for bureaucratic ethics approvals because questions that could be discussed over a coffee needed to be reviewed for potential risks and legal exposure as they involved invasive medical procedures.
3. A few practitioners were not willing to participate in the research, principally because they were required to sign Informed consent forms, which made individuals nervous about discussing their organization’s problems.
4. Finally, when the thesis was finally written up, the findings were of only moderate interest to my practitioner colleagues who considered the rigor of the arguments to be implementable and certainly not as easy a read as competing marketing material.

The above issues are not insurmountable and were indeed overcome in due course, and wiser and more experienced researchers would know there are ways to undertake research expediently. But the challenges nonetheless demonstrate the hurdles facing academic research and knowledge creation that do not exist for marketers. Indeed, at the end of my Ph.D.,

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having seen how both academic and industry knowledge creation systems operate, I genuinely wondered if doing academic research was perhaps a detriment to the development of my ideas. This was the opposite of my original idealistic expectation that my rigorous, impartial research would be accepted as an antidote to the clear, bias evident in the marketed solutions apparent in business.

I was wrong – no one cared. All knowledge seemed to be equal in the eyes of the practitioner. But how could that be, when one aspires to be thorough and impartial while the other is focused on selling products and services?

There is appears to be an unconscious equation that practitioners apply when assessing knowledge, irrespective of whether that knowledge comes from consultants, vendors or academics. Simply put, it is that business relevance, practicality and evidence of tangible results trump the academic's theoretical grounding, peer-reviews and comprehensive referencing. The two sides of the equation are not mutually exclusive, but there can be a practitioner bias which assumes they are, and that any result of academic research will necessarily be theoretical and irrelevant.

Academics are not without their own biases and preconceptions, one being that practitioners are merely the raw material from which to extract knowledge which can then be used to train and enlighten a new generation. Yet, without the strictures of a rigorous research method, practitioners often utilize far more advanced practices than are realized by academics. I have personally witnessed practitioners groan as an academic presented some new research finding that was new in the literature but has been common practice for decades. Although these practices may not appear in journal papers or have the theoretical underpinnings academics demand, they are very real, often with well-developed constructs described in industry papers.

Bridging the practitioner-academic divide requires both sides to understand and address their respective biases. Although there are challenges to getting academic research accepted by practitioners and adopted by businesses, doing so represents an opportunity to break out of a perpetual marketing cycle which offers little in the way of knowledge advancement. Yet, while the academic's tools of the trade may be useful in the development of new knowledge, that knowledge is only valuable if it is of relevance and value to practitioners.

Academics appear to me to be in an excellent position to extend their influence if they can borrow some of the marketer's techniques and apply the first rule of marketing: Know Your Customer. Yes, this requires that practitioners be recognized as the customer, or consumer, of academic research – not simply other academics. And it would demand deeper engagement between academics and practitioners so that problems are understood, and the search for solutions is a more collaborative endeavour. Finally, it would mean that any management model or theory is tested on the basis of its practicality, adoption and acceptance by practitioners, just as scientists must test their theories in the natural world.

On the road to this Nirvana, the role of practitioner and academic would blur, and the distinctions dissolve until all that remained was the informed investigator motivated to overcome the challenges facing society.

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