

IRNOP 2011: Proposal for a Workshop  
Expanding the domain of project management by revisiting its past

**Description of the workshop**

*While the material past cannot be changed, we  
construct and re-construct comprehensions of our  
past to inspire the enactment of the future  
(Bakhtin, 2006).*

What brought you to project management? What are the classic readings of project management? Do we have such a thing at all? How did the management of projects change in the last decades? These questions are at the heart of the proposed workshop.

The key objective of the workshop is to provide a face-to-face forum for discussion and recollection of our common past and how that helps us construct the future of projects management in academia and in practice. The workshop is moved by the belief that history matters in management (Kantrow, 1986; Kieser, 1994) and, therefore, also in project management. However, compared to business history and management history, project management has been little discussed and scrutinized in a historical light. With the notable exceptions of Peter Morris' work (1994) and the in-depth studies of Thomas Hughes (1998) and Stephen Johnson (2002), we actually have limited if not inadequate account of the history of project management in practice and in academia (Lefle and Loch, 2010). A better understanding of history can improve our understanding of the difficulties and approaches used in creating, shaping and managing projects. 'Project History' also serves to create a common ground among academics within this domain of knowledge, both in terms of readings as of cases.

We therefore invite you to *look back so we can move forward* and from that end we will expand the domain of project management by recollecting some of the major insights in classic research and writings on project management. The workshop is part of a movement within the project management research community in ball out our roots, our history, represented through the EURAM 2010 "back to the future", and current Special Issues on the Classics of Project Management and on Project History.

Instead of academic debates, we propose a *dialogue*. After thought-provoking presentations on the classic project management cases and readings, it is time for us to work collectively in developing comprehensions of our past. The 'audience' becomes speakers in groups coordinated by a 'knowledgeable' discussant.

The groups would discuss questions such as:

- What brought you to project management (personal journey)?
- What they considered to be the key readings in PM and what are their favorite ideas?
- Looking at the past, and the development to now, what they believe to be the roots for the future?

We then open to discussion, each group presents, and pool ideas together. Ideally, the output of the work could be a Research Note in the Special Issue on IRNOP.

Let's co-develop the comprehensions of our *memory of the future!*

### **Short overview of presentations**

Sylvain Lenfle will present some of his findings from his work on the history of project management, particularly work on the Manhattan Project. “Modern” project management is often said to have begun with the Manhattan Project, which developed the first atomic bomb in the 1940s, and PM techniques were developed during the ballistic missile projects, Atlas and Polaris, in the 1950s. The Manhattan Project “certainly displayed the principles of organization, planning, and direction that typify the modern management of projects.” It “exhibited the principles of organization, planning, and direction that influenced the development of standard practices for managing projects.” This characterization of the roots of PM represents a certain irony: the Manhattan Project did not even remotely correspond to the “standard practice” associated with PM today. Indeed, the Manhattan and the first ballistic missile projects fundamentally violated the phased project life cycle approach. Both applied a combination of trial-and-error and parallel trials in order to “push the envelope,” that is, to achieve outcomes considered impossible at the outset.

However, the project management discipline has now so deeply committed itself to a control-oriented phased approach that the thought of using trial-and-error puts professional managers ill at ease. Experienced project managers react with distaste to the violation of sound principles of phased control when they are told the real story of the Manhattan Project (or other ambitious and uncertain projects). The discipline seems to have lost its roots of enabling “push the envelope” initiatives, de facto focusing on controllable run-of-the-mill projects instead. How could this happen? And does it matter? In this presentation, we explain how the discipline “lost its roots.” We argue that this matters a great deal: it has prevented the project management discipline from taking center stage in the increasingly important efforts of organizations to carry out strategic change and innovation. By excavating the roots of the management of innovative projects, we attempt to connect PM to a growing body of work that emphasizes the need for flexible search in innovation and organizational change.<sup>5</sup> PM has an opportunity regain the central place it should never have lost in the management of strategic initiatives, innovation, and change, but this will require adding more flexible methods to the available toolkit.

Jonas Söderlund will discuss his findings from a historical study of landmark studies from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A particular case in point is that of the Göta Channel project completed in 1829 which still today constitutes one of the major projects ever carried out in Scandinavia. He will argue that there is much to learn from this and similar kinds of historical landmark projects, especially if we are to demonstrate the role of projects and project management in improving social and technological infrastructures. Söderlund will also demonstrate how these landmark projects not only were major engineering endeavors but also that they creating knowledge about how to run complex activities, coordinate across disciplines and managing stakeholders that also played a key role in subsequent projects, including the railway projects and other sorts of large-scale construction projects.

Joana Geraldi will argue that project management research has paid limited interest in the research of the past. She will illustrate with a few examples from current research how findings from prior studies are recurrently neglected creating a field that is diverging and which lacks a common and firm grounding in shared ideas, concepts and theories. Geraldi will provide a list of classic studies in project management based on ongoing work with a special issue on the classics of project management. Her main questions are: What can we learn from this classics and how does it improve our current research agenda?

**Time required**

2 slots of 35 minutes each. First slot is devoted to the presentations. Second slot focuses on group discussions and plenary integration.

**List of participants**

Joana Geraldi is a lecturer at University College London. She has published in the International Journal of Project Management and presented several papers at previous IRNOP Conferences.

Sylvain Lenfle is an Assistant Professor at CRG, Paris. He has published work on project management in numerous journals, including California Management Review and International Journal of Project Management.

Jonas Söderlund, Professor at BI Norwegian School of Management Söderlund has published in journals such as Organization Studies, R&D Management, and Human Resource Management. His is one of the editors of the recently published Oxford Handbook of Project Management.

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