Rethinking IT project management: Evidence of a new mindset and its implications

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the rethinking project management agenda in relation to the information technology (IT) sector. Our analysis of the evolution of thinking and practice among leading IT project managers across four countries elicits nine principles and four personal qualities that constitute the core of a mindset that facilitates rethinking the practice of IT project management. We compare this with the Rethinking Project Management research agenda [Winter M, Smith C, Morris P, Cimil S. Directions for future research in Project management: the main findings of a UK government-funded research network. Int J Project Manage 2006;24(8):638-649.] Our contribution is to (1) validate the directions defined in that agenda; (2) identify elements not incorporated in it and (3) provide examples that crystallise the agenda for the domain of IT project management.

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1. Introduction

A recent study, called Rethinking Project Management [1–5] has highlighted the need for a fundamental re-appraisal of project management research. The study identified five directions for advancing research and was based on collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners. The five directions identified were: complexity, social process, value creation, broader conceptualisation of projects, and reflective practice. Each direction can be seen as enhancing conventional wisdom. Taken as a whole, they amount to a substantial, even radical, re-statement of the nature of projects and project management. While academics and practitioners alike may accept the appropriateness of each new direction intellectually, we need to articulate what this means to the project manager in practice. From the perspective of a project manager, there is the question of what kind of person would they need to be to embrace all five directions and attempt to integrate them into a coherent management approach. In short, we need to understand the mindset that will drive project managers to advance practice in the ways implied by the Rethinking Project Management (RPM) agenda.

Concurrently with the RPM research, we investigated how information technology (IT) project management has been changing and why. We interviewed more than 50 thought-leading practitioners across three continents. The IT sector was chosen because there has been such pressure for improvement that it was reasonable to expect to find evidence of innovation in practice [6,7]. Our focus was on identifiable changes to project management. In conversations with us, our interviewees provided data that offer insight into how they themselves are rethinking...