Critical Thinking in Project Management

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Project management as a body, is standardized in its processes and structure. Governed by the Project Management Institute (PMI) and the textbook, Project Management Institute (2013) A guide to the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK) (5th Ed.), project managers apply five process groups, ten knowledge areas, and 47 key concepts as their standard and framework throughout the project management field. In the scholarly journal article reviewed for this paper focused on project management as a discipline, the author argues that the relevance of the diffusion of generic project management knowledge may be lost through generalization and standardization generally known as "Best Practice". This paper will reflect upon my knowledge, skills and abilities that I have acquired from my instructors and colleagues while navigating through the Master of Science in Project Management Program (MSPM) at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide to analyze and evaluate the article findings.

Review

The article, *Relevance lost! A critical review of project management standardization,* critically analysis the consequences of the diffusion of generic project management knowledge. The author argues the relevance of the diffusion of generic project management knowledge may be lost through generalization and standardization generally known as "Best Practice". According to the PMI, best practices is the pulse of the profession that identifies what high-performing organizations do consistently to deliver more strategic initiatives, reduce dollars at risk, and create a competitive advantage (PMI, 2014).

PMI's key factors of high-performing organizations are:

- Aligning talent to strategic initiatives results in higher number of successful projects

- Maturing project, program and portfolio practices reduces dollars at risk

- Having engaged executive sponsors and managing change lead to great success

The article, *Relevance lost! A critical review of project management standardization,* debates that relevance may be lost at two levels. During the first level, the practice of project management is transferred, through generalization and standardization, into what is generally known as "Best Practice". At the second level, the "Best Practice" is transferred back to where it is applied (education, research, certification and practice), as depicted in Figure 1 (Hällgren, Nilsson, Blomquist, & Söderholm 2012).
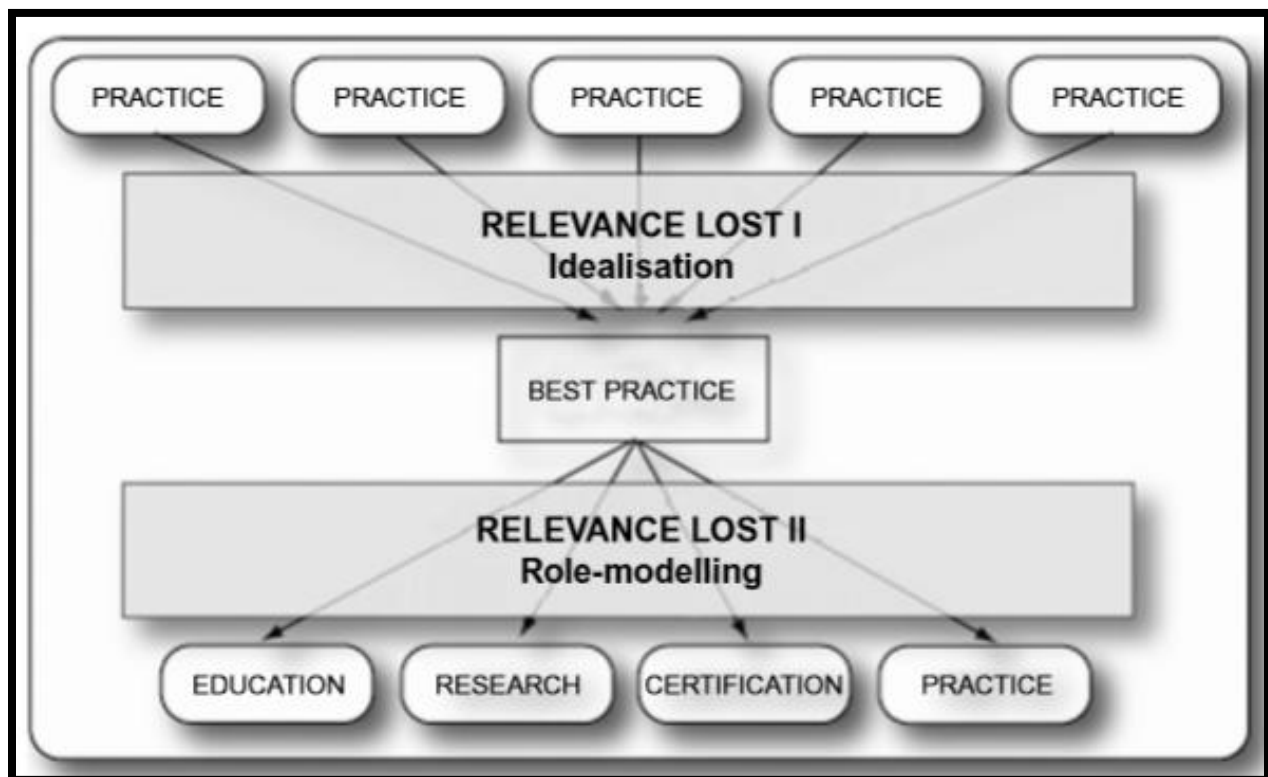

Figure 1 Relevance Lost. Reprinted from "*Relevance lost! A critical review of project management standardisation*". by International Journal of Managing Projects in Business, 2012, p.479. Copyright 2012 by International Journal of Managing Projects in Business. Reprinted without permission.

According to the articles author, relevance is lost because project managers take what they learn during their studies and paint a picture in their head of the ideal way projects should run and apply it as a standard which becomes their best practice. They then lose this idea of what they think is the standard or best practice when they hit the real world. Developing the best practice, in reality, is much more complex than that. Ideally, the standard is created based on comprehensive observation in the project management field. As illustrated in figure 1, the idea is lost at what is labeled as "Relevance Lost I: Idealisation".

Since the idea or picture painted in their head is not the reality from observed, real life experiences, they do not reflect situated practice and it is hazardous to use standards as role models that do not reflect real life situations. According to the article, *Relevance lost! A critical review of project management standardization,* there are four situations that might lead to problems and in which standards might be mistaken for models of practice: research, certification, education and designing project management practice. Since the model is an idealized thought, it can never be seen as in the real standards. When the idealized best practices are applied as the model for the way things should be done, the relevance is then lost as labeled in the illustration as "Relevance Lost II: role modeling".

The article, *Relevance lost! A critical review of project management standardization* implies that the way "Best Practice" is developed into the standards for the project manager professionals through idealized views from their studies of what best practice is without reality based situations and practiced standards raises concerns throughout the project management profession. The author concludes with, "Standards are not inherently bad but it is beyond this paper to expand on their positive virtues. Nevertheless, considering the diffusion of PMBOK and similar standards across industries, standards are best considered as informed experts' comments

on how things can be done within certain areas of activity. The standards can work as checklists

for practitioners, educators, consultants or students but can hardly claim to be anything beyond

that. With this paper we therefore raise a word of caution to anyone whose work is influenced by

the standards in a direct or indirect way. It is not that the standards are wrong: it is simply that

they should not be mistaken for a picture of reality" (Hällgren, Nilsson, Blomquist, & Söderholm

2012).

Analysis

To breakdown the article, *Relevance lost! A critical review of project management*

standardization, further I want to concentrate on what is meant by "Standardisation of

knowledge". The article refers to standerdisation of knowledge being the transfer of what is

learned from the PMBOK to a standard used in the project management profession without real

life lessons. The article claims that it is not realistic to believe project management professional

can determine what should be standard work processes without the real world experiences. With

the recognition that knowledge is often situated and embedded within particular social groups

and situations, this has considerable relevance and merit for understanding attempts to manage

knowledge in settings where activities and learning are project based.

At my current employer (Pratt & Whitney), I have been the lead on several

projects to do benchmarking research on our competitors. In my experience, benchmark studies

are best done on competitors that are deemed "Best in Class" for their specific area of expertise.

This means they have established a "Best Practice". I define "Best Practice" as a method or

technique used consistently showing repeatable results at a superior level compared to other

methods use to complete the same task. By benchmarking our competitors that are deemed best in class we can start our process at what is known as the best method to achieve the results wanted for a specific task or function and improve upon that task or function from the start. This method of standardization of a process saves costly and valuable time by eliminating the pain felt during the process improvement process. This is what I believe the authors are trying to capture as real life relevance to the knowledge of the process versus real life uses. I feel that the governing body, Project Management Institute, supports the use of best practices and they do so with great concern to further the Project Management professionals throughout the field. In my opinion, the use of the Project Managements best practices provides a great guide and standardization for us to use in the real project world.

In my experience, the consequences that social processes potentially play are an important part in the diffusion and transfer of knowledge and learning. **Is process of knowledge actually captured during the studies of the PMBOK's five process groups, ten knowledge areas, and 47 key concepts?** Arguably**,** I can agree with the authors' point of the article but at the same time, during my studies for my Masters of Science in Project Management obtained from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, along with my colleagues, we were challenged by our instructors to create real life projects for major organizations at a domestic level and at a global level. While creating multiple projects in the project management program I learned about the significance of social factors in enhancing knowledge management capabilities in such environments by drawing upon case studies and extensive research during the project deliverables. We used a community based approach that forced us to rely heavily on social patterns, practices and processes of knowledge capture, transfer and learned in project settings to

complete successful projects as project managers with a emphasis on value and the importance of adapting the knowledge acquired in real life scenarios.

Evaluate

Upon my evaluation of the article, *Relevance lost! A critical review of project management standardization,* the significance of the article is justified in its attempt to warn the project practitioners of the relevance that is lost because project managers take what they learn during their studies and put it to use automatically as "Best Practice" and the standard for which they base their project methodology. I agree this can be hazardous to the industry. The article highlights the mass effect it can produce on a global scale. To develop a standard and then call it "Best Practice" you must include the real life scenarios and situations first before applying the knowledge learned.

Conclusion

For almost 50 years, project management was viewed as a process that might be nice to have but not one that was necessary for the survival of the firm. Companies reluctantly invested in some training courses to simply to provide their personal basic knowledge of planning and scheduling. Project management was viewed as a threat to established lines of authority, and in many companies only partial project management was used (Kerzner, R. Harold, 2014).

Obivously, project management has come a long way over the past 50 years. The mind set is no longer one that it would be nice to have but one that finds it necessary to survive the competitive market. Project management has evolved into a professional process required to gain competitve advantages. Project Management Body of Knowledge "Best Practice" has quickly

been adopted as the standard method of benchmarking the compatition. As practitioners, we must acknowledge the revelant loss between knowledge based and situational based mangement and bridge the gap by focusing on lessons learned and past sucesses to ensure project success on a global scale.

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