

PROJECT

ISSUE 307
SUMMER 2021
£14.50

THE VOICE OF THE PROJECT COMMUNITY



THE CHARTERED BODY FOR THE PROJECT PROFESSION

THE BIGGER PICTURE

THE GOOD AND THE GREAT ON HOW PROJECTS WILL SHAPE OUR FUTURE

PLUS

NICK SMALLWOOD

INTERVIEW WITH THE CEO OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE AND PROJECTS AUTHORITY

THE UK'S VACCINE TASKFORCE

NICK ELLIOTT ON WHAT IT TOOK TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

SECTOR SHIFTERS

DARING TO MAKE A PROFESSIONAL PIVOT



Debbie Lewis
APM chair and director of strategic architecture programmes, BT

Project professionals in a world of technological change

Technology is now woven into almost every aspect of our lives. Communications technology is at the core of this evolution and is itself transforming. We are moving from an era when bandwidth and ubiquity were the drivers of communications technology change to one where reliability, latency, trust and personalisation are the focuses. The customers of technology and its capability are also changing, not just in terms of human demographics, but also because machines are now in the mix.

We now have expectations of instant digital gratification, wherever we are and whatever device we are using. In fact, we are indifferent to the technology and really don't care if it's a fixed communications network or a mobile one, or what device we're using. We want the same capability in all cases and we want to move seamlessly between devices; it's a world expecting continuous connectivity. And if we're a machine in the internet of things, we need scale; millions of machines connected in a super reliable, super secure mesh. Machines that sense each other over national distances, orchestrate their activity, are intelligent, and learn and adapt.

How can we succeed in our project practice in this environment?

The opportunities are many: new tools for virtual working, automation, artificial intelligence, data mining and new ways to learn. I have no doubt that our professional practice can benefit greatly from this technology-driven change. What we need to do is adapt in as proactive a manner as possible. APM has a key role in enabling this, helping us identify the ways to adapt, providing the resources for the learning and the forum for mutual support. However, as individuals we also have a responsibility to be open to the new, to want to grasp the opportunities and to work together on realising their benefits. The foundations of 'traditional' project practice remain strong, but we must explore and adopt new ones in order to remain effective.

The challenges lie in our professional skills: our ability to see simplicity in complexity and focus others; our ability to lead through times of ambiguity; and our skills in understanding and managing risk. However, if I were to identify the soundbite that draws it all together, I believe it is the project professional's ability to adapt and to make collaboration happen. Success in any complex context is rarely the result of a lone pursuit. It is enabled by drawing together different and unique perspectives and enabling collaboration, conversations and creativity.

That is at the core of our practice and why I am confident that, with the right support, project professionals are well placed to navigate the challenges successfully. Indeed, our skills are more relevant than ever and they are the skills that society, business and the economy need to recover, change and flourish.

Starting afresh and rediscovering innovation



Darren Dalcher
Professor in strategic project management, Lancaster University Management School; and director, National Centre for Project Management

Over the past 12 months and more, our world has changed dramatically as a result of the pandemic, forcing a recalibration of norms and behaviours. Yet the need to respond urgently and engage with rescue and recovery activities means there has been very little time to think about the changing nature of projects. As humanity seeks to establish a new normal, it becomes important to reflect on what we have learned during this turbulent period.

The responses of different countries across the globe have reshaped civilisation in unprecedented ways and may suggest new opportunities for societal engagement and the delivery of meaningful change. What, then, are the lessons for project management?

We have witnessed the results of exercising disaster management and rapid recovery projects on a global scale, often with spectacular results. At the start of 2020, it would have been unthinkable that most schools would be

The radical shifts that normally define transformation appear to have been mastered by society

THE BIGGER PICTURE

closed, billions would be out of work, individuals would be confined to their homes, all children would be home educated, food and toilet paper would disappear from shelves, landlords would not collect rent, banks would suspend mortgage payments, public gatherings would be banned, governments would put together the largest economic stimulus packages seen in a generation in order to maintain national economies, and the homeless would be housed in hotels. Yet it is increasingly clear that crises can rapidly reshape society, the economy and life as we know it.

Many of the urgent projects we have seen around us were borne out of crisis. A crisis is a wake-up call. Crisis situations are extreme because they threaten our very survival, creating an overwhelming urgency to resolve them. The pandemic has shaken many of the foundations and deeply held conventions underpinning society, the economy and government. The unique power of a crisis is in making the familiar shatter almost instantaneously.

The impact of a crisis can be likened to a rogue wave striking a ship in deep seas – sudden, spontaneous and significant. The response to the crisis necessitates a near continuous stream of urgent and unexpected mini-projects characterised by immediate decisions, plans that must be created and enacted in a matter of hours (or minutes), an immediate reversal of our conservative aversion to risk-taking, and the abolition of an excessive reliance on speculative business cases.

Hard-won insights

The results have been nothing less than spectacular. In our haste to respond, we uncovered new abilities to work together, embrace new technologies, collaborate and achieve the impossible. The radical shifts that normally define transformation appear to have been mastered by society: hospitals built in 10 days, new vaccines in circulation within a matter of weeks, education systems moving online and significant changes to all forms of human interaction, communication and collaboration. Indeed, rather than finding new leaders

for times of crisis, we instead discovered a new society ready to band together.

Management guru Peter Drucker observed that: “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday’s logic.” Perhaps our greatest challenge beyond the pandemic will be to retain our rediscovered sense of innovation beyond the immediate scope of the crisis and to embrace the new spirit of inclusivity, cooperation and creativity. To prepare for the challenges of a more turbulent and volatile tomorrow, we therefore need to harvest hard-won insights from our experiences.

The six Ps

The experience of working in more demanding contexts will require new positioning, including increased attention to the following aspects:

1 PURPOSE

Increased primacy of meaning, needs, purpose and value creation.

2 PEOPLE

Greater orientation on self, employees, customers, community and society.

3 PLACE

Proliferation of remote, flexible and home-working modes away from the office.

4 PLATFORM

Adoption of online platforms to compete with face-to-face communication.

5 PRAGMATISM

Experimentation, testing and adaptation will remain essential to flourishing in a fast-changing world.

6 PROFESSIONALISM

Reflection-in-practice and the ability to cope with and make sense of turbulent, volatile, novel and ambiguous conditions.

Underpinning it all is our willingness to continue to initiate, invent and innovate as project management rediscovers its way and its place in supporting, enhancing and sustaining society through meaningful change.

● *This article draws on content from Darren’s forthcoming book, The Future of Project Management, to be published by Routledge. He is also co-editor of the 7th edition of the APM Body of Knowledge.*

Q&A > FROM THE FRONTLINE



Nick Elliott

Former director general,
UK Vaccine Taskforce

Q What role will programme management play in rebuilding the country?

It has a huge role. We’re going to need to invest in our economic recovery, and that investment must be managed in an effective way to make sure we get the benefits from it. This means that programme and project managers are going to be at the heart of our economic recovery, and not just from COVID-19. We are moving into a new phase where our climate targets are going to be hugely important, as well as the levelling-up agenda of government.

Q What has been the biggest lesson of the pandemic?

Expect the unexpected. If we’re going to have contingency plans, then they need to be real. We had a pandemic contingency plan for the UK, but actually it wasn’t a real plan, and when it was tested, it didn’t actually hold up. If we are going to plan, then let’s plan properly.

Q What are the most important skills that project professionals need?

Being inquisitive – look for different ways of solving things and make sure you always seek information and use it to make decisions. Also maintain perspective. One thing that the last year has done for an awful lot of people is give them perspective of what’s really important to them and what’s not. And you’ve got to maintain your sense of humour otherwise we’ll all go mad!

Read Nick’s account of leading the Vaccine Taskforce on page 38