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Popularity vs. Profession: the Project Management Dilemma

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Editor's note: This paper was originally published as Lucid Thought no. 34 in April 2007 by Lucidus Consulting in the UK. It addresses an interesting and important dilemma related to the debate about project management as a profession. It is reproduced here with approval of the authors and Lucidus Consulting. For more information, see author bios at end of article.

Project management is already considered by many to be a profession but some of us remain to be convinced. In order to remove any possible doubt the already converted are aiming to convert the rest of us by:

- Further defining and differentiating project management from general management; and
- Seeking greater recognition through qualifications and through chartered status.

Unfortunately this move to further recognition is complicated by one very important word 'project'. It used to mean a unique piece of work delivered within time, cost and quality constraints to meet objectives (or whatever variation on this description you prefer) but over time this seemingly clear definition has become muddied. The word project is now firmly set in common parlance. Not only do we have projects to manage the building of a 100,000 seat sports stadium or to launch a new bank account but our children have history projects to produce a piece of researched work on the Romans or the Cold War.

This means 'we' have conspired to create a vast number of projects ranging from the biggest and most complex endeavours ever undertaken to projects that are simple and are carried out by an individual person without any need to involve anyone else (apart from willing parents and friends). As a result of having a vast number of projects we suddenly have a vast number of people who call themselves project manager.

The table below gives four definitions for the terms project and project manager drawn from the APM, PMI, OGC and the internet encyclopaedia Wikipedia. It is interesting that all of the definitions differ yet none totally contradict each other and the overall sense and intention of each definition is largely consistent.

	Definitions of the term project:	Definitions of the term project manager:
APM Body of Knowledge 5 th Edition 2006	A unique, transient endeavour undertaken to achieve a desired outcome.	The individual responsible and accountable for the successful deliver of the project.
PMI PMBOK® Guide 3 rd Edition 2004	A temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result.	The person assigned by the performing organisation to achieve the project objectives.

PRINCE2 Manual - OGC 2005	A temporary organisation that is created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to a specified business case.	The person given authority and responsibility to manage the project on a day-to-day basis to deliver the required products within the constraints agreed with the Project Board.
Wikipedia 2007	A temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service.	The person who has the overall responsibility for the successful planning and execution of any project.

Combining the definitions into one consolidated view might lead to the term project being defined as:

“a unique, transient endeavour undertaken to create a product or service over a specified period and within cost, quality and resource constraints and in accordance with a specified business case”

And project manager as:

“the assigned person given the authority and responsibility for planning and executing the project to meet its objectives”

So – there seems to be a general agreement on what a project is and what a project manager does – but yet overuse and/or misuse of the terms. Whilst wondering why this was, we came across two examples that seem to typify the problem.

Last month while reading a careers supplement from the Times newspaper we spotted a job advertisement for project managers. While this is not by any means an unusual occurrence what struck us was the actual requirement. The document management company that was advertising was looking for project managers for its day, evening and night shifts i.e. three people to do the same job at different times of the day.

A second example occurred only last week when we were contacted by the ‘project manager’ responsible for organising a five-day training event for an international construction company visiting the UK. The ‘project manager’ wanted to know where our presentation was and if we would be staying overnight or not!

It appears to us that the title ‘project manager’ is now used by almost everyone as the name given to the person in charge of getting a job done. Surely in the first example the job title should have been production manager or operations team leader but certainly not project manager and in the second example maybe event organiser or event coordinator.

In order to further substantiate our hypothesis on overuse and misuse we decided to carry out some research. Without the means or time to conduct a massive research programme we wondered how we could find out how often just the term project manager was used in daily life. We decided that a simple test of this would be to carry out a Google™ search on the term

(searched as a phrase) and compare it with other well known jobs and roles. The results certainly surprised us; see the table below.

Based on a Google™ search on the phrase (search conducted on 6 th September 2007)	Number of hits
• Project Manager	54,000,000
• Accountant	40,200,000
• Mechanical Engineer	2,180,000
• Production Manager	2,130,000
• Operations Manager	2,040,000
• Risk Manager	1,990,000
• Medical Doctor	1,970,000
• Civil Engineer	1,930,000
• Finance Manager	1,960,000
• Electrical Engineer	1,860,000
• Human Resources Manager	1,680,000
• Rocket Scientist	1,070,000
• Brain Surgeon	386,000

Whatever we think about statistics what we found tells us that the term project manager is used more than any of the others we looked at, and we tried to think of the most likely role descriptions in an organisation; and yet of those considered it is probably the least well defined or understood.

It is true there are some small projects where a single person is responsible for doing the work and managing it to defined time, cost and quality objectives such as producing an advertising leaflet on your own PC for your new house-minding service and then distributing it to the local community. There are also other 'projects' that are not projects at all but are just work to be coordinated and managed, or there are projects where someone is managing just one aspect of it (a work package) and they are not responsible for time, cost and quality of the overall product. It is perfectly reasonable on large projects for work to be delegated to others but not everyone can be project manager. In an organisation where the Finance Director has a team of people working for them, not everyone is called Finance Director; so why is it that everyone is a project manager?

Why does any of this matter? We suggest the profession faces a significant dilemma. While the **terms** project and project manager are thrown around like confetti on a wedding day then the **profession** of project management can never genuinely exist as it cannot be differentiated from what many consider is just managing work. Popularity of the role project manager and all it brings with it (including examinations and rival associations) and the requirements of a true (even chartered) profession seem to be at total odds with each-other.

Is the popular use of the terms and concepts good, so we shouldn't try to curb the enthusiasm? Or is the inaccurate use damaging to the development of a serious profession? Should we care? We'd be interested to hear your views.



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