

## VIEWPOINT

## A Reason to Celebrate &amp; Three Wishes for Project Management

By Eric Jenett

I was asked two both intriguing and challenging questions the other day. The first was: In your opinion, what can we celebrate most in the “World of Project Management” this year? The second was: If you were granted three wishes to help the “World of Project Management”, what would they be? Were the questions thoughtful? Challenging? Meaningful to PM? Deserving of answers? Inappropriate? Of no interest? Inane? A joke? My answers to what the questions represent are “yes” to the first four and to the last three “unhuhh!!”

Now to the answers. To the first: I view the most important - to project management - event (I prefer to use initiation or happening or thread or movement better, for “events” are hard to define accurately) to celebrate. I believe it is the current trend towards recognizing, accepting and then accommodating the concept of locality or localization. In my use of that term I consider that it includes geography, language, mores, level of sophistication, business ambient, business sector and type of project. This “localization” needs to be considered each and every time a new participant (or better, participating party) joins or interacts with the project and, at least, its principal then-participating entities and parties.

In my opinion, it is important for the world of project management to recognize/identify/define ( BOTH by INclusion and by EXclusion) and then develop or usefully address such of those “attributes” present on a project. It is equally important to recognize, acknowledge and address other such attributes as they may arise over the course of the/each project. I believe the recognition and acceptance of this endemic, and indeed indigenous, aspect of project work has been inherent in the “world of project management” from the days of the pyramid building to the days of spaceflight.

As for the professional organizations serving the world of project management, the recognition and acceptance of that reality has been reflected in the structure of some organizations from day one, when it was called the INTERNET, to the current IPMA. Local grouping (typically country) is the fundamental unit of the organization and are also the (sole?) point(s) for the origin-sourcing, the development-driving and the implementation-spreading of all such efforts with the universality of applicability applied also by the “local unit”. The Project Management Institute (PMI) appears to be finally acknowledging this reality in terms of what it calls CTP (community transformation project). It is this emphasis and the attention (both inside and outside PMI) that it focuses on the subject that earns - for the concept of “localization” - my vote for most important event of the year. Let me hasten to add that I most emphatically DO NOT view this as a “win” for those who believe the biggest part of PM is the so-called “soft side”. This ain’t soft side anything! It’s the hard scrabble, bare knuckles realities of project work from “light bulbs on” to packing up and archiving when the project’s product is “sold/accepted and ‘operating’ ”.

To answer the second question (about my three wishes) is more difficult by at least one order of magnitude. I guess my first wish would be that people (every one) recognize, accept and practice the conviction that there are certain fundamentals or principals that are inherent in, endemic to and characteristic of PM. This said, what really concerns me is that each/any group of individuals who BELIEVE they are a niche insist that they’re different and “need” their own body of knowledge, their own standards, to recast/rewrite almost in toto the work on PM of most other organizations attempting to speak for PM; I use the words “believe” and “need” as being different - a need is, in my use, inherent or integral a belief is a desire or current conclusion. All this as they repeat endlessly to themselves and to the world “- - - Oh! But we are different”. Certainly there are differences. However, these differences are largely if not entirely in: 1) meanings assigned to words and phrases and the “invention” of words and phrases - yes and even “concepts” - as a means of distinction, of building “togetherness”, of creating an illusion of uniqueness and of justification for building the distinctions. All such elements belong most properly in the domain of glossaries, tables of equivalence and such; actually, a table of equivalence (or of differences) would be quite useful to the PM community. 2) the “commercial” and “business” aspects of the sector can be and are indeed viewed as different.

I would contend that they are really a selection from a spectrum of business or “contract” attributes applied/selected for the sector - and perhaps unknowingly or unconsciously so - from a whole spectrum of possibilities or conditions. AND this entire “spectrum of the possible” really exists for ALL sectors though each sector has selected what

it collectively believes the most probable in that sector. It is this collective (and thus peer pressure fortified) limiting of what's open for choice when a project starts in a sector that has, in my opinion, resulted in some serious failures. And finally, 3) the general belief that techniques or approaches developed in/for one sector can't possibly apply in/for "my sector". Tailoring of timing, of sequences, of alternatives, of "gates" and their use, of parallelism of activity viz-a-viz sequentialization again may well vary between sectors BUT it really is all part of the full spectrum when you say "project management" instead of much more limited term of "project management for or in - - - -" (fill in a sector of your choice). An acceptance of and thrust towards commonality and concepts of spectrums would, I believe, markedly benefit both the profession and the business side(s) which really does (do) exist only in sectors. While these do have some commonalities across sectors, the needs of the sector and its inhabitants are the driving force(s) that produces projects.

My second wish for PM would be that all elements involved in a/any/every project recognize and use the power and universality of the concept of "SCOPE". Project managers in particular need to recognize that they will never receive a scope from the project's owner that is full, complete, not-needing-change and fully useful on the day received. It just doesn't happen - and perhaps shouldn't - given that part of a project's definition is its uniqueness. Nobody knows better than those actually working on the project know what's needed to make the project "right" and able to move forward efficiently and effectively. On virtually any project that is really a project, the "real scope", or better the content of the scope statement needed, is an unfolding thing. It is not (cannot) be fully defined in the detail needed for the project to use it at the outset. It is important, I believe, to accept and remember that the scope statement provided by the business side is often not adequate to fulfill all the needs to which a "scope statement" is put to on the project. To believe contrariwise is to run counter to the dictum (too seldom stated) that the PM must periodically check for changes in the "business side" of the project. Changes there do (or might) impact project philosophy, execution, direction, content or even the validity declaring "project death". It is one of the PM's primary obligations to see that the scope document existing on a project is complete enough to enable work to move ahead with little danger of rework needed and yet not so restrictively worded that it encourages blind adherence, misled activity and a blinding to risks AND opportunities.

My third wish for PM would be that there exists a mechanism and staffing to produce an adjudged compendium adequately and sensibly indexed and "codified (but not ossified) so that access to content in multiple ways was possible and such results produced as to encourage wider and wider use; and perhaps aid in the effort to achieve progress towards the first wish above. As an aside, one of the most useful concepts I ever encountered along these lines was that titled KWIC (key words in context). Even just applying that approach to paper and book titles produced a powerful (perhaps thus) use-encouraging output. I think it must be a funded effort to succeed as intended. Discussion groups are useful in some of this. However, most are not disciplined enough to be useful. This is because most don't classify or categorize inputs (no really accepted framework exists at the moment), most consist of conversations between a few individuals almost endlessly repeating the some thoughts (and often the same words).

Worse yet, many participants use a full forward of prior exchanges (complete with procedural additions coming from the use of the "e-mail system"). Such an approach provides wonderful berthing for boredom, ennui and a feeling of hopelessness. What's needed for the profession is something similar to the efforts in corporations to create a position of Chief Knowledge Officer, apply knowledge management and develop a useful and usable "knowledge resource" or knowledge repository. I understand IBM has been in the forefront of such efforts on their own behalf. Perhaps they could be influenced to help initiate such a project, assist in developing the "rules of engagement" (a necessity I believe) and perhaps even staffing initially and on a part-time basis the initial supervision and mentoring for those who will wind up running the effort full time.



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*Engineering from Columbia University, Eric spent a majority of his career with Brown & Root Corporation in Houston, Texas, USA retiring in 1989 as Corporate Vice President. During his career, Eric had experience working on a wide variety of project types in the USA and abroad. He is particularly proud of having started, executed and closed out every project on which he had project management responsibilities. Eric was one of the founders of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) in 1969 (he is PMI member #3), and served as PMI President in 1971, Chairman of the PMI Board of Directors in 1972, and PMI Secretary during 1975-76. He was instrumental in founding the Houston PMI Chapter (the first PMI Chapter chartered) and served as Houston Chapter President and Chair. He also helped organize PMI's first regional seminar in 1976, which evolved into the annual Seminars/Symposium and now Global Congresses. His PMI recognitions include Distinguished Contribution (1975) and PMI Fellow (1982); he also carries the distinction of PMP #1 (ret.). PMI's "Eric Jenett Project Management Excellence Award" is named in his honor. Eric was also an early member of the American Association of Cost Engineers International (AACEi), having attended their formation meeting in 1956. He has been a member of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE) for over 40 years and was a registered engineer in Texas until his retirement. Eric has written and lectured on both technical and project management topics and authored over 20 professional papers and handbook contributions, including several for PMI publications and for the Houston PMI Chapter. Only partially in jest he describes his lifetime goal and guiding principle as being: to hunt down and eradicate the existence, acceptance and practice of the project management paradigm that in effect says: the project manager operates to solve the problems of today by tomorrow applying the techniques of yesterday.*