

IT'S JUST ABSURD!



Complex project management – a necessary new skill or an elitist absurdity? Australian academic **Jon Whitty** opens the debate and says ‘ditch the concept’.

THERE is a move in some quarters to develop the concept and accompanying ‘specialist skills’ in the name of complex project management.

In my view, this tag will only create an elitist and unnecessary layer of ‘uber’ project managers nurtured on the basis of some sort of pseudoscientific exigency – the need to manage complex projects.

This new ‘complex project management’ view contrasts sharply with the culture of recent years and it will shape how project managers think of their work and themselves.

Let us be clear that we are talking about the practice of managing projects, all of which have the potential by their very nature to give refuge to complexity. What we are not talking about is the practice of medicine or law, despite what some may think! I think it’s unlikely that anyone has ever lost life or liberty directly as a consequence of an individual’s incompetent practice of project management techniques.

If this notion of elite complex project management takes hold, the impact will be felt across the world, including China where they are becoming positively passionate about project management. The overwhelming and generally unempowered majority

of practitioners and scholars will willingly share in a collective ignorance of obvious facts, despite individually recognising the absurdity of it all.

Fact 1: All projects harbour some complexity. Defining a discipline as ‘complex project management’ assumes that one can find projects devoid of complexity and project managers capable of only managing non-complex projects.

Fact 2: Projects do not really exist. The term project is a construct used to describe a particular human activity. Projects, per se, do not exist in any real tangible sense; however, imagining that they exist can be helpful.

The metaphor of an invisible cord is often used by teachers of ballet to correct the posture of a dancer. The dancer is told to imagine an invisible cord running up through their body, from their toes, out through the top of their head, and up to the sky. Consequently, the dancer’s posture is considerably improved.

However, the crucial point is that both teacher and dancer know that the cord does not really exist, but the mental construct of the cord produces behaviour that proves to be beneficial.

Imagine ballet dancers like project managers discussing their invisible cords and challenging each other on the complexity of their composition. The concept of ‘project’ does provide many benefits. It helps to set boundaries around a group of activities so that they may be discussed and

referred to others. ‘Project’ is a convention that we have all learnt to understand, and our society reinforces it; but we, like the child who watched the Emperor’s parade, must never be fooled that a project exists in any real sense.

I foresee a class struggle ahead that will polarise and alienate members of the project management community into virtually two camps. In the one camp will

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The nice thing about standards is that there are so many of them to choose from.

Andy Tanenbaum, US computer scientist

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be the complex populists and in the other, the project management romanticists – the present day members of the project management professions who recognise that complexity is not a unique phenomenon and that it manifests variously in their projects.

The project management community does not need to be fractionalised in this way. Conducting research and participating in the practice of the project management phenomenon is difficult enough without the further distractions caused by the qualitative (complex and non-complex) classification of projects.

It is my belief that scholars of project management should spend their time questioning and examining norms and not reinforcing them. Practitioners of project management are poised ready to grasp solutions to their problems, and I challenge scholars and practitioners to breakaway from conservatism and embrace new ways of thinking about project management.

The first step should be the rejection of the discipline called complex project management!

Jon Whitty hails from Wales but is now an academic at the School of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering at the University of Queensland, Australia.

He has dedicated himself to participating in the debate about project management.

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What do you think? Do you agree with Jon or do you believe he is off the mark? Email your views to james@impact-now.co.uk or post them on the blogspot <http://projectandnetwork.blogspot.com>