

Extending Project Practices for the Future of the Profession in the Face of Climate Change and Other Grand Challenges

Project, program, and portfolio management (P3M) needs to evolve as societies worldwide face more complex and interdependent Grand Challenges (GC) such as climate change.

Projects are an important mechanism through which governments will support and encourage the business sector to innovate and enact high-level global agendas. They are critical for the sociotechnical transition to sustainability as a pathway to achieve climate change objectives.

This research had two main goals: 1) to deepen the understanding of P3M's role and relevance in implementing the climate change goals agenda and 2) to explore, better understand, and prioritize the challenges that climate change poses for the scholarship, discipline, and practices of P3M.

Researchers wanted to learn the extent to which P3M practices were employed in projects with climate change objectives and how these practices could be developed further to address climate-specific challenges. Researchers were particularly interested in how the climate policy agenda affects the day-to-day practices of project-based organizations (PBOs), which operate exclusively through projects.



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Reframing the Role of Projects

One realization became clear: The role and practices of projects supersede the conventional understanding of them as vehicles for operational execution and delivery. To achieve climate change and sustainability goals, governments and organizations need to reexamine the transitional and strategic potential of projects, programs, and portfolios.

The research revealed two sets of project practices necessary to expand the operational execution focus:

- ▶ **Vanguard Projects** develop new technologies and services and are typically organized in networks for one-off endeavors motivated by a high-level policy goal or aspiration. PBOs learn how to address policy objectives from vanguard projects and then transfer them to business-as-usual (BaU) projects.
- ▶ **Strategic Project Practices** of framing, definition, selection, and staffing focus on adopting strategic goals and objectives and they are complemented with the prominent absence of the transformation of operational project practices as they are discussed in the professional bodies of knowledge of project management.

Findings

Four key insights emerged from the two project practices examined:

- 1 Project practices for GC policies are not only about execution and delivery but also the role of projects in climate change and sustainability transitions and an organization's strategy for adopting GC agendas into their BaU.
- 2 Vanguard and exploratory projects have strategic significance because they shape priorities and define strategy, while BaU projects provide the backbone of the business model and operations.
- 3 "New" project practices needed to address GCs are not necessarily new, but they are being used for a different intentionality and goal orientation.
- 4 Managing changes requires institutional entrepreneurship and a bottom-up approach acknowledging a shift in the profession's boundaries and ethics.



Through project-based organizing, the conventional responsibilities and operational execution-focused role of the project profession can be extended to strategically address climate change and other Grand Challenges. Among their recommendations, researchers suggest project management professionals adopt an organic and localized approach to meaningfully engage with GCs.

Practical implications for the profession uncovered by the research include:

- ▶ **Scope and Aim of Project Work:** The project managers' (PMs) decision-making authority and, by extension, the aim of their work, needs to expand. PMs will need to incorporate effectiveness and critical evaluation into their decision-making framework while remaining focused on efficiency practices such as time, cost, and quality.
- ▶ **Professional Ethics:** The profession needs to advance a coherent body of ethics that will determine its evolution and guide future generations. Future project professionals will want a code of ethics rooted in their own practice and experiences of the world as well as the evolution of project work.
- ▶ **Scale and Politics:** From everyday "mundane" projects to major initiatives, GCs require the mobilization of projects across different scales. Seemingly small steps can lead to big changes. Given the political dimension of GCs, project professionals can help involve multiple voices and perspectives.

OVERALL TAKEAWAY: There is a symbiotic relationship between how the project profession's practices must change in response to society shifts and how GCs are radically transforming the boundaries of the profession. To implement the necessary strategic project practices and sociotechnical practices driving these changes, project professionals must embrace disruptive ideas. This in turn will reinvent and reconfigure the role of the project profession in society. Given the urgency of challenges like climate change, the PM community must act quickly to redefine the role of their profession in the society and economy. This will enable them to shape and deliver innovative projects which are needed to tackle the pressing issues. As practitioners, PMs must exercise their agency and power to help ensure the planet's survival.

To read the full report, visit pmi.org/learning/academic-research.

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