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Project Management Implementation as Management Innovation: A Closer Look

Janice Thomas, Athabasca University, Canada;
Stella George, Athabasca University, Canada;
Svetlana Cicmil, University of the West of England, UK

■ ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS
Innovation Management
Change Management
Program Management
Strategic Planning

The research examined lessons learned from innovation management journeys undertaken by 48 organizations in 12 countries around the world over a 30-year period. Ten of these innovation journeys were selected for intensive review and analysis. The research investigates the processes involved in implementing project management as a particular case of management innovation, and describes how the innovation should evolve to produce value. Practitioners will find useful practical implications and heuristics containing critical success factors for innovation management.

■ THE PROBLEM

"[Innovation] is the intentional introduction and application within a job, work team or organization of ideas, processes, products or procedures that are new to that job, work team or organization and which are designed to benefit the job, work team or the organization."

West, 2002

Organizations often increase their strategic capacity by implementing innovations. These intentional changes affect the organizational structure and modify management practices, standards, and decision-making processes. Innovation aims to improve an organization's ability to function efficiently and effectively. The literature on management innovation and organizational change highlights the complexity of the phenomenon of innovation.

Very few studies have examined project management as a management innovation. Innovation in an organizational context is "the intentional introduction and application within a job, work team or organization of ideas, processes, products or procedures that are new to that job, work team or organization and which are designed to benefit the job, work team or the organization."[1]

Practitioners and organizations require guides for engaging innovation journeys with success. This study aims to understand the dynamics of the management innovation in question, and to extrapolate knowledge on management innovation and project management implementation. The study identifies practical implications for organizations engaged in innovation processes.

■ THE STUDY

This research investigates the processes involved in implementing one particular type of management innovation—project management—and how these innovations must evolve and be modified in order to deliver value. The research examined lessons learned from project management journeys undertaken by 48 organizations in 12 countries around the world over a 30-year period. The research selected 10 innovation journeys for close examination. The sample was used to understand the peculiarities and success factors of innovation processes.

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[1]West, M. 2002. Sparkling Fountains or Stagnant Ponds: An Interactive Model of Creativity and Innovation Implementation in Work Groups. Applied Psychology: An International Review, 51(3) 355-424.

	Continuous	Episodic
Convergent	Improvement within single division that improves upon or supports existing practices: i.e., revision to templates and tool kits supporting existing PM frame. These are known as PERSISTENT EVENTS	PM improvement that supports existing practices but that are disruptive: i.e., introduction of new automated tool to support PM practice. These are known as TECTONIC EVENTS
Radical	PM improvement aimed at moving PM practices into other divisions and across the organization. Training for non-project managers. These are known as TURBULENT EVENTS	PM improvement that addresses specific perceived weaknesses in existing practice by introducing new practices and rolling this new practice out enterprise wide: i.e., introduction of PM. These are known as PUNCTUATED EVENTS

Figure 1. Event matrix: contextualization of pace and scope[2]

Innovation can be mapped in a two-dimensional space defined by pace (Continuous or Episodic) and scope (Convergent or Radical), defining four regions or types of innovation events. Figure 1 presents the event matrix with the contextualization of pace and scope.

Innovation journeys are defined by a succession of innovation events. They start with an event in any region of the event matrix and then follow successive events in the same or other regions. The paths followed characterize different innovation journey patterns.

The research identified four typical patterns:

1. Continuous Convergent innovation events aimed at polishing and improving a particular project management approach

2. Continuous improvement efforts aimed simultaneously at both Convergent and Radical innovation

3. Initial Convergent Episodic interventions aimed at fixing a problem with a project management approach

4. Finally, the innovation journey labeled "revolutionary," because it began with impetus from outside the organization and from an innovation event that radically repositioned and rethought the practice of project management within the organization

These four common innovation journeys depict specific ways in which organizations embrace project management to balance demands of efficiency and standardization aimed at improving the fit or effectiveness of project management practices, and the evolution of these practices over time.

The findings show that the progression of an innovation journey cannot be understood solely as a sequence of innovation event "labels." The trigger and outcomes for each intervention provide information about the journey to date and where the innovation could go next. Each intervention has an expected outcome, and whether it is achieved or not will influence an organization's decision-making about subsequent interventions.

[2] Street, C. T., & Gallupe, R. B. (2009). A proposal for operationalizing the pace and scope of organizational change in management studies. *Organizational Research Methods, 12*(4), 720.

■ PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Strong organization-level sponsorship and effective leadership are most likely to create successful innovation.

Key success factors appeared by comparing and contrasting the cases with each other. For instance:

- Strong organization-level sponsorship and effective leadership are most likely to create successful innovation. Effective leaders must be able to win over the culture and attitude of the organization, and must be suitably supported in order to succeed.

- Successful innovation journeys were supported by strong executive interest combined with a clear, externally driven trigger; addressed a strategically important organizational issue; and, exhibited strong project management championship.

- The presence of a champion is required. Clearly the project management champion must be more than an experienced project manager or methodologist. This individual must also be capable of the political entrepreneurship necessary to shape the socialization and learning process of the project managers and others, in order to ensure intergroup safety and integration across the organization.

Uncertainty provides the impetus for ongoing creative efforts.

- Another important factor for successful implementation is recognizing the need to maintain a level of uncertainty with respect to the deployment of project management practices. Uncertainty is just as important to successful project management implementation as are sustained momentum and routines. Uncertainty provides the impetus for ongoing creative efforts.

- The literature suggests that management innovation should lead to continuous improvement. However, the research found that "continuous improvement" appears to be understood differently in different contexts, and these contextual variations can influence the outcomes of apparently similar innovation journeys.

- Finding the correct fit between the selected management innovation event and the organization's culture has been shown to be an important step toward delivering management value from investment in improving project management practice.

- Previous investment in project management can be destroyed by more recent innovation events that change project management practice without building on and reinforcing expertise.

- The evidence suggests that the most successful project management innovations are those that include a liberal dose of creativity and tailoring of the solution to the context and needs of the organization.

- Organizations that succeeded with their innovations did so because each intervention became part of the organizational culture.

- Not every organization that innovates gets the positive benefits it is anticipating.

The most successful approach to innovation in project management is to consider it as a journey that requires a prolonged period of time to maintain and sustain the project management efficacy.

- The most successful approach to innovation in project management is to consider it as a journey that requires a prolonged period of time to maintain and sustain the project management efficacy as opposed to a single investment approach. This suggests that organizational ownership (as opposed to consultant led) project management innovations are most successful over time.

■ PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS *(continued)*

Practitioners need to be aware of the social contexts embedded in power structures supported by political aspirations and individual life choices that do not necessarily align with the assumptions that are taken for granted.

- Every organization that sets out to introduce or improve project management must undertake four important activities:
  1. Determine where to invest its project management dollars
  2. Build a robust project management implementation that meets the organization needs
  3. Introduce it in a way that makes it most acceptable to the organization culture
  4. Identify the metrics for measuring the success

Innovation is truly impacted by many significant factors such as organizational context and history, power relations (including cultural, structural, and political dimensions), external pressure and threats, and uncertainty.

Practitioners need to be aware of the social contexts embedded in power structures supported by political aspirations and individual life choices that do not necessarily align with the assumptions that are taken for granted, and which privilege goals of efficiency over business effectiveness.

The research illustrates that project management is a good example of management innovation. Project management implementation, when it is recognized as a management innovation, entails fundamental change to existing management practices and belief systems.

■ FULL CITATION

Thomas J, George S, Cicmil S. *Project Management Implementation as Management Innovation: A Closer Look*. Newtown Square: Project Management Institute, Inc., 2013.

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