

Knowledge Mapping and the Price of Knowledge

By R. Max Wideman

Introduction

For some time we have been advocating the idea of a project management knowledge structure (PMKS). In a 1997 paper "A Project Management Knowledge Structure for the 21st Century"¹ we wrote: "The purpose of such a structured arrangement would be to provide the basis for a more systematic discussion of project management issues." We went on to explain that: "Perhaps the most important opportunity for a PMKS is to facilitate rapid identification of needed information.

A consistent grouping of subject matter would also be helpful to practitioners and educators alike for practice, training, education and research. It could be very helpful in conveying an integrated understanding of PM. Even identifying a realistic scope of project management for professional purposes would be a significant step forward."

Applying knowledge mapping

In a follow-up paper in 1998 we attempted to apply the process of knowledge mapping to propose a project management knowledge structure. In the paper "Defining Project Management Knowledge as a Basis for Global Communication, Learning and Professionalism"², we observed that:

"If we had a better understanding of the nature of project management we might be better able to:

- Establish a more universal terminology to facilitate communication around the world.
- Provide professional leaders with a better basis for discussion of issues and knowledge and information exchange.
- Provide educators with a better framework for project management learning.
- Provide owners and sponsors with a better basis for project selection, initiation and direction
- Simplify an otherwise complex arrangement.
- Reduce the confusion between what is general management, what is project management and what is technical management.
- Better understand where a general understanding of project management ends, the need for instruction on specific application of project management starts and hence better understand the needs of our 'customers'.
- Understand differences in levels of project management complexity, technological complexity, and consequent risk and success criteria.
- Convey to potential customers the merits and methodologies of project management for purposes of maximizing new-product benefits.
- Answer more convincingly the question 'Why do so many projects fail?'
- Advance the project management profession technically, into more industries and organizations, and into more geographic areas globally."

Now, over five years and millions of words later, are we any closer to resolving these same issues?

Instead, a project management maturity model?

Today, the hot topic-of-the-moment is the Organization Project Management Maturity Model, or OPM3 fort short, now being sold by the Project Management Institute for \$345US (regular single user price). This product is the result of an extensive volunteer member project effort commenced at around the same time (May, 1998) as my paper. According to John Schlichter, the original volunteer program manager, the OPM3 "[will describe] the capabilities likely to lead organizations managing by projects to become increasingly more capable in the translation of organizational strategy into successful and consistent delivery of projects."³

The input to the project is derived from interviews, surveys and the opinions of participants. At the end of the day, the result is no doubt a good record of what organizations are doing at each level of defined "maturity". Bear in mind, however, that just because everyone is doing it does not mean to say that it is the right nor the best thing to do. It only tells you what your most formidable competition is doing – which, of course, is a help. More importantly, one wonders how reliable are the findings if the communication issues we listed above still exist.

In spite of attempts over the same period, the project management community has been unable to come up with an agreed project management knowledge structure. In our view, without some structure, and all that necessarily goes with it, it is not possible to conduct effective communication of the issues. Of these issues, perhaps the most important one is: "Where are the gaps in our knowledge of project management?" Without establishing this, any OPM3 must surely fall short.

American Productivity & Quality Center perspective

If you have not visited the American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) web site recently, at <http://www.apqc.org/> you might find it worth doing so. Their primary area of interest is Knowledge Management and they specialize in Knowledge Mapping. As they say of one of their conferences:

"Knowledge Mapping

Creating a knowledge map with a detailed understanding of information and knowledge needs is critical to any knowledge management initiative, whether enterprise wide or focused on a specific business process. This one-day session focuses on the tactical steps and tools used to identify the information/knowledge gaps, to conduct an investigative process to find out where the information/knowledge is located, and to locate and prioritize how the information/knowledge can be used to enhance key areas of focus."⁴

So far, so good. That sounds like a pretty convincing case for knowledge mapping.

APQC claims to be "A recognized leader in benchmarking, knowledge management, measurement, and quality programs" and "helps organizations adapt to rapidly changing environments, build new and better ways to work, and succeed in a competitive marketplace." Their Knowledge Sharing Network provides access to best-practice information, metrics, and benchmarking tools and templates. Although project management is not listed as one of their areas of interest, nevertheless APQC has recently issued a white paper "Finding Project Management Performance Benchmarks"

Not the answer we expected

In the report "Finding Project Management Performance Benchmarks", the authors state:

"The Performance Benchmarks series of reports provide metrics results and key observations from focused benchmarking efforts. *Project Management*, the first report in this series, details compelling metrics data from 26 organizations that represent a diverse group of industries, structures, revenue classes, and project types. Top performers were interviewed about their individual critical success factors in five key areas:

1. Actual cost of projects as a percentage of budgeted costs,
2. Percentage of projects completed on budget,
3. Percentage of projects completed on time,
4. Average time ahead/behind schedule for primary projects, and
5. Actual primary project hours as a percentage of budgeted hours.

This report is the first in a new series from APQC with a singular focus on metrics results. The report details project management activities that are relevant across industries, such as office set-up, factors relating to project value and duration, resource leveling, project manager training, and documenting project management processes."⁵

Well, well. Not a mention of metrics for customer satisfaction, let alone value to the sponsoring organization in terms of contribution to corporate strategy. Sort of proves our point made earlier regarding the value of surveying organizations on their existing practices.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is the cost of the complete report: 121 pages for a mere \$995US (non-member price). At that price the Project Management Institute's OPM3, albeit the efforts of unpaid volunteers, has to be a positive give away at only \$345US. Perhaps the cost of knowledge is too expensive to structure?

¹ Project Management Institute's 28th Annual Seminar & Symposium, Chicago, Illinois, September 29, 1997

² Global Project Management Forum at the Project Management Institute's 29th Annual Seminar & Symposium, Long Beach, California, October 11, 1998

³ Schlichter, J., Program Plan, September 2000, p4

⁴ APQC web site <http://www.apqc.org/knowledge-management> January 2004

⁵ APQC Document ID: 113180, published 10/6/03