Professor Ali Jaafari describes the gap between education and the real world of project management, and proposes a bridge.

Over the last five years, I conducted a number of detailed case studies of projects in both Australia and overseas with the aim of diagnosing their managerial shortcomings and suggesting improvements. The results clearly demonstrate that:

- The actual practices applied did not match the complexities of management of these projects.
- Managers strived to get their hands around the projects with limited success, and often left prematurely.
- Contemporary project management knowledge, standards, models rarely addressed the real challenges, often creating a layer of bureaucracy on top of already complex arrangements.
- Managers often used intuition and experience to make decisions and plans, or to respond to complex situations faced on the go.

In a recent assignment, which involved investigation of a major infrastructure project, I noted that the application of the ‘latest standards’ was a mere formality. While several project management charts and diagrams adorned the project manager’s office and meeting rooms, the actual planning and execution of works did not follow the project management processes developed in accordance with such standards. In fact, the project management processes and plans were complicated and nobody seemed to know how to apply them.
The case demonstrated everything from poor appreciation by decision makers regarding project size, scale and complexity, to virtual absence of project strategic planning and poor governance, risk management and teamwork in general, which crippled decision-making processes.

The project was by no means isolated; the literature in project management is studded with failed projects and disillusioned clients. There is clear evidence that the contemporary practices, standards and approaches do not adequately address the challenges of projects and programs of significant size and complexity; in some instances they may actually hinder their proper modelling and management. In other words, there are fundamental unanswered questions regarding the assumptions and models embedded in contemporary standards and approaches. It appears that such assumptions and models are a byproduct of traditions entrenched in the practice of project management and education, training and enculturation of project managers.

**THEORY AND PRACTICE DISCONNECTED**

Look closely at the sources of failure; on many failed or distressed projects, most setbacks and discontinuities that typically cripple projects during their execution phase are manifestation of risks and shortcuts taken earlier, poor decisions, or a disregard of complexities.

Projects must be managed continuously from their creation/selection to development, planning, implementation and operation. Breaking them into phases and executing each phase in different times can cause sub-optimal solutions.

It is wrong to assume that project managers should not get involved or be interested in project selection, development and continuous business alignment, as these are the functions performed by clients or specialist consultants. The real purpose of a project is to meet stated needs and requirements in an optimum manner. What is the good of a well executed project if it neither delivers the business case nor meets the sponsor’s objectives? Project management excellence by itself is absurd; ultimately excellence must relate to project performance in terms of the value of change it will bring and how efficiently the needs have been satisfied.

If we are to consider a project as a complex adaptive system with its own dynamics, it has profound ramifications for education and development of project managers. Acknowledging that contemporary models of education, training and practice do not match the realities of managing projects is the starting point.

Project management is not separate from product/facility management. Project objectives are defined in three classes—financial, performance and environment—which contrast with the traditional view of project objectives of scope, time, cost and quality. Management of external risks, customer and market relationships, technology and innovation, regulations and other business and strategic drivers pose major challenges and cause discontinuities to execution. Thus project success depends on optimum management of business and strategic variables, as well as management of risks that cannot be quantified in impact and/or probability of occurrence. The shift in thinking in terms of both objectives and strategic management of complexities is not adequately and purposefully acknowledged or reflected in the contemporary project management practices or the training curricula.

**CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES, STANDARDS AND APPROACHES DO NOT ADEQUATELY ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES OF PROJECTS**

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**A PARADIGM SHIFT**

How can industry and profession bring about change? The answer is to recognise that the current methods of project management need to evolve. Delivery of a scope of services as per a contract does not constitute a project. It’s true that project management principles in their simplest form can be used to properly plan and deliver a scope of services as per the terms of a contract, however a project by definition aims to fulfil a stated business or social need. A package of services is a contribution to the achievement of the objectives and must be delivered to optimise the project outcomes. The whole project lifecycle and framework should be revisited for greater success in the field.

Client/sponsor organisations should lead the way in the adoption of a systemic project management framework. This is an essential first step, but it is not sufficient. Changing the mindsets of industry players and engendering a fresh understanding of project management will achieve real change. Unless we do that, we are not going to address management shortcomings nor achieve much progress by mere adoption of a revised project management framework.

Change must be deep-rooted and we must ask ourselves the tough question of what is wrong with the contemporary approaches to management of projects of significant size and undertake more in-depth research and critical questioning. The education programs therefore need careful redesign to enable the development of a superior class of project and program managers.

Reference to complexity aims to convey the ‘messy’ nature of real life projects, contexts and environments that project managers, clients, contractors and others have to deal with on a routine basis. Project managers must attempt to integrate seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints, deal simultaneously with both emotive and hard facts, observe due diligence, cut risks and lock in value in time and space. They must be capable of gathering enough information and developing a mental model of the
The Project Manager invited three educators to speak on the gaps between education and profession.

LYNN NORTJE
Business Director at UXC Training Group

What are the gaps between the project management profession and education?
The gap between the theory and the practice. It’s not a new gap, but the struggle is how do we take our guys out of the classroom and put them into the real world?

What can industry do to close the gaps?
Industry tends to create the gaps by putting the wrong people in the role in the first place. They need to understand what the role of a project manager actually is and the skills that are required. It’s not just a five-day course: that’s just the first part, then there are the soft skills.

What can educators do to close the gaps?
Education has to change. The key message for educators is flexibility; yes, you have a syllabus you have to address, but bring in real examples for the audience you have and feed that into the learning so it’s something they can actually use. You have to give people experiential learning to reduce the gap.

What are some of the key challenges?
People go on a course but Rome is burning and they can’t focus. It’s like starting a project without the business case, then retrofitting it. Organisations like to see that they’re investing money in the right place so as educators we have to stop looking at it as a piece of paper and as building up skills and capability in an individual.

What is the desired outcome of closing the gaps?
The organisation understanding it’s a learning process so it continues to support these project managers. It should look at us like a partner rather than as a training provider to take them through that journey.

EDUCATORS SPEAK

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NEIL HOCKEY
Learning & Development Manager at ANZ Australia

What are the gaps between the project management profession and education?
- Improving delivery channels for project management learning (beyond e-learning), incorporating modular learning and just-in-time delivery.
- Providing consistent project management skills training globally, especially for organisations like ANZ, which has a strong regional presence.
- Focusing on complementary and soft skills that make good project managers great, for example leadership skills, legal knowledge, and change management.
- Leveraging the networks that project management learning provides to create coaching and mentoring support that helps embed learning and transform knowledge to performance.

What can industry do to close the gaps?
Partner with education providers to support these actions. We have a responsibility to enunciate the need, and share success stories and pain points so the learning helps to solve real issues and improve performance.

What can educators do to close the gaps?
Build global alliances to support the consistent skills delivery across multiple geographies, cultures and languages, work with industry to deliver learning with more flexible options, and bundle complementary and soft skills training to make them more visible.

What are some of the key challenges?
To successfully deliver projects in a dynamic environment and build the networks and relationships between education providers and industry.

What is the desired outcome of closing the gaps?
To further enhance our project managers’ skills, provide clear career path support, deliver globally consistent skills, and make our project managers more successful to make the organisation more successful.