

Mind the Gap: exploring expectations for project practice in Responsible Project Management

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Responsible PM - A paradigm shift

Calls to the profession to move beyond technical functions, recommending and embracing the principles of responsible and sustainable practice are well established, however, awareness of these concepts from multiple perspectives remains elusive (Hwang & Ng, 2013; IPMA, 2015; Økland, 2015; Huemann & Silvius, 2017; International Organization for Standardisation, 2017; Silvius & de Graf, 2019; Thompson & Williams, 2019; Magano et al, 2021). The required change of focus from tools and techniques to incorporate mindsets, knowledge and skills that empower project professionals to deliver a wider range of benefits is challenging. This has created the need for delicate balance between environmental sustainability, social equity, economic viability, efficient administration (APM, 2022) as well as supporting the growth of individuals and organizations in developing their capabilities.

The core aim of this study is to explore and understand the expectations of project practitioners in Responsible Project Management (RPM). By elucidating the viewpoints of stakeholders, the study aims to provide nuanced insights into the unique challenges, aspirations, and considerations inherent in pursuing and fostering responsible approaches within the project management domain. Specific objectives are found in Table 1:

Objective	Details	Proposed Methods	Intended output
Objective 1	Identify role and benefits of RPM across and beyond the traditional project life cycle	Systematic literature review	Understanding of extant literature, as a basis for exploring the expectations of practitioners
Objective 2	Identify perceived knowledge, skills, and competences of RPM amongst project professionals	Semi-structured interviews	Identified set of expectations from diverse perspectives
Objective 3	Identify challenges experienced at the practice level in using RPM knowledge, skills, and competences	Semi-structured Interviews	Identification of practice specific to RPM
Objective 4	Explore differences in expectations and experience in RPM amongst project professionals	Inductive, comparison of variables, thematic analysis	Analysis of gaps from diverse perspectives
Objective 5	Develop a deeper understanding of the practice requirements of RPM	Focus Group(s) validation	Development of an Expectation gap model

Table 1: Objectives, Methods, and Intended Outputs

The Research Question is therefore, *what are the expectations and gaps of project practitioners in developing knowledge, skills and competences in Responsible Project Management and how do perceptions influence professional practice?*

Initial Literature Review

Extant literature from academic and professional sources concur that the role of project management practitioners is evolving to address sustainability within and by projects. Responsible PM has been conceptualised in terms of proposals for change to management practices (e.g. Laasch & Conaway,

2015), as emerging from moral reflexive practice (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2013). RPM is the concept of managing projects with conscious attention to intended and unintended impacts of projects and outcomes. Its ten principles via the RPM Manifesto are intended to guide practice, improve conscious awareness, and facilitate project decision-making in ways that deliver value that includes the environment and society (Thompson & Williams, 2019). RPM embodies responsible business practices, emphasising transparency, ethical conduct, and meaningful stakeholder engagement (Cicmil & Gaggiotti, 2018).

Research by Tabassi et al (2016) also suggests that project managers should possess the necessary transformative leadership competencies, skills, and knowledge to be able to achieve sustainability success in projects as well as contribute strategically to the transition towards sustainable societies in general. However, increasing such responsibility also means progressing incrementally towards the desired future transition, which requires new levels of knowledge and understanding (Thompson, 2023). Shifts in mindset that integrate complexity and uncertainty, through holistic approaches and behaviours are needed to manage current and future challenges (Silvius & Schipper, 2014; Kassel et al, 2018; Thompson & Williams, 2019; Rimanoczy, 2021; PMI, 2021, 2022). Use of the term “mind-shift” suggests that it is not just new knowledge that is required but a shift in understanding, skills, behaviours, flexibility, and adaptability (Thompson, 2023).

Scholars suggest the professional bodies should spearhead the drive for solutions and skills to address future challenges recognising the integral association with ethics, bound within the code of professional conduct (Cha et al, 2018; Tabassi et al, 2019; Sabini & Alderman, 2021). However, it is perhaps worth noting that whilst bodies of knowledge are deemed to be an essential part of the profession, these are a situated element. As such, it is the application of this knowledge by the practitioner in an environment controlled and owned by multiple stakeholders that requires further exploration.

Research rationale

Organisations are increasingly recognising the strategic advantages of integrating ethical and sustainable considerations into project management (e.g. see Hussain et al., 2023). Scholars contend that integrating such considerations into project management aligns with the broader goals of sustainable development and corporate citizenship (Bag et al., 2024). Since this is rooted in the evolving expectations of multiple stakeholders the rationale for deeper enquiry into RPM practice is of paramount importance.

Theoretical Approach

The research addresses emergent needs and challenges in daily practice, where practitioners continually construct and reconstruct knowledge (Gadamer; 1975; Schatzki, 2002; Jarzabkowski, Lê & Feldman, 2012). It draws on Sandberg et al's (1992) concept of *praxis research*, emphasizing a dualistic interaction between practitioners and researchers focused on conceptualisation, reflection, and transformative action. Understanding the praxis of RPM involves theorising its practice and reasoning, as well as participation within the social community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 1998; Kemmis, 2010). This underscores the need to uncover diverse expectations and address challenges to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills and competences required for a Responsible PM.

Methodology & Methods

The research proposes to employ an exploratory, qualitative approach, commencing with a systematic literature review establishing a baseline for understanding the role and benefit of RPM in practice. Semi-structured knowledge elicitation interviews (around 20-30 participants) will then focus on uncovering awareness, importance, and significance of RPM in developing professional practices. Perceptions and experiences will be analysed for comparison of variables to establish a set of initial expectations and gaps. Interview data will be analysed inductively and thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Sampling will be purposive, encompassing a broad spectrum of industries within the UK, and

will include participants with varying levels of project management experience, ranging from early-career professionals to those at mid-career and established stages.

Anticipated findings are expected to reveal a set of expectations and gaps, from which an initial RPM Expectation gap model will be developed, to be further explored and initially validated through focus groups from a representative sample from the professional groupings (early/mid/established). Focus groups will employ reflexive dialogue concerning conceptual clarification, and emerging interpretations of competency based on the lived actuality of practitioners (Nicolini, 2013; Laasch & Conaway, 2015).

Contribution to knowledge and practice

Findings will be co-created with authentic and specific perspectives of those who are in practice, including those with lived experience of RPM (Huemann & Silvius, 2017). We will contribute to both theory and practice by:

- 1) Developing a new practice theory informed model of RPM that can be further explored by academics and professional bodies.
- 2) Providing nuanced insights into the unique challenges, aspirations, and considerations inherent in pursuing and fostering RPM within contemporary PM practice.

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