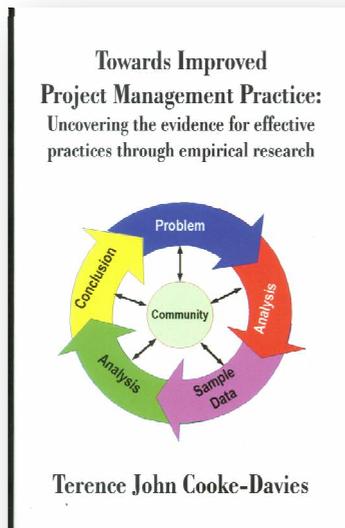


Towards Improved Project Management Practice, by Terry Cooke-Davies

A Book Review by Ian Jay

Which project management practices impact project success? The book's author decided to find an answer. To do so, he studied live projects in 'communities of practice' set up for this purpose. How he did it and what he found is presented in this book.

The author, Cooke-Davies, set out six specific questions to answer with the research. The problem he found is that there are about three thousand discrete project management concepts. These concepts represent a large body of knowledge. This list had to be reduced to a set of practical ideas that could be examined further. His first task was to isolate the concepts that were truly relevant to most projects. The second task was to set up a group of people who would provide real life data about the use of the concepts on projects.



The solution to the first problem was to analyse the content of published bodies of knowledge. The analysis identified that there are sixty concepts that appear in two or more of these publications. A workshop with some of the World's acknowledged thought leaders in the field was held to review the list. Their view was that the list was complete and all elements were relevant. The second chapter of the book explains in detail how the concepts are grouped into five themes and eleven topics. These taken together make up the project managers worldview, which is presented as a system diagram showing the relations between the topics.

To solve the second problem, several industry groups were created. Each group had representation from different industries. Group size ranged from eight to fifteen companies. Each company was allowed to send two people to group meetings

which kept the number of people at meetings and workshops to a manageable size. To assist the groups in their work, the research team provided skills in data collection and other areas. In the end several groups were created around the World.

The entire project ran in three one year cycles, each cycle found answers to a different set of the questions posed at the start. The first cycle identified a set of best practices in the community. This was the result of several workshops held through the course of the year in addition to data collection from inside the companies that took part. The second cycle created a database of corporate practices. This allowed member companies to benchmark themselves against the group as a whole. More importantly it created a database of metrics about projects that would enable more insight to be gained into the answer to the key questions. The third cycle yielded a tool that could be used in-house to capture key project data. In addition the participants began to adopt some of the suggested practices.

The book is based on the author's doctoral thesis. It starts by setting out the context of project management in relation to normal management activity. It then provides a systems model of the project manager's world view. The research process is then described in some detail. This includes practical advice about setting up networks of commercial firms and how these are governed. The research findings are then presented and the last chapter describes areas for future work.

The practical advice is quite detailed. As an example the set of rules governing the communities of practice are given. These are built into what the author calls the research methodology. For example one of its parts is the requirement that the community members sign a formal agreement. In this they agree to provide resources and share data with the rest of the network. This financial and contractual commitment creates the right conditions for the research to be effective.

The conclusions of the work are interesting. It is quite positive that project management practices have a beneficial impact on project performance. But it goes on to say that the practices that impact

on schedule performance are not the same as those that impact cost or scope. Of the three, cost, scope and time, it is time that is least predictable and is affected by more practices than the other two. Of the time related practices, the key ones are mentioned, these relate mainly to risk management. But also includes the documentation of responsibilities on the project. The work also found that projects planned to run for more than three years face a greater level of time uncertainty than those of three or less years.

This is an informative read for anyone with an interest in project management. It provides a sound introduction to what project management is, and so would serve as good a good primer for students. In addition it provides value to people in education or industry. It will also be useful to those interested in setting up 'communities of practice'.

Terence John Cooke – Davies is an Adjunct Professor of Project Management at the University of Technology, Sydney, and an Honorary Research Fellow at University College London. The book is his thesis for which he was granted a PhD by Leeds Metropolitan University in 2000.

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