

HITTING A MOVING TARGET

*Complex Project and Programme Delivery
in an Uncertain World*



*This Roundtable report is authored by Reverend Michael Cavanagh and Dr John Findlay.
Editing provided by ICCPM.*

1. Introduction

The World Economic Forum (WEF) report *Global Risks 2012/2013* makes pretty depressing reading, showing an alarming combination of likelihood and impact of the major risks identified in the light of ever-increasing global interconnectedness. Resilience is identified as the key element needed by countries and organisations to mitigate these risks, most of which are beyond any single entity's individual capacity to control. They also warn against a paralysis of inaction while waiting for more specific detail and research – the time to build resilience is *before* the risks become issues – but recognise that the lack of certainty means that we are unsure about what action to take.

Yet we still have to deliver our projects – build bridges, hospitals, infrastructures, deliver health programmes, defend our security and educate our children. In every area, we face increasing complexity and must anticipate unexpected external forces and events. How can we deliver the outcomes we need in a rapidly changing and uncertain world? How can we make sure that the initial desired outcome of a long duration project will still be fit for purpose when it is eventually implemented? How can we hit a moving target?

This report describes the output of the International Centre for Complex Project Management (ICCPM) Roundtable convened to address this issue.

The purpose of the Roundtable series is to bring the collective wisdom of the participants – drawn from both practitioner and academic communities and selected according to appropriate and significant experience – to bear on the given topic, with the principal outcome being a clear definition of further action required.

The 2012 Roundtable became an exercise in understanding, reframing and working out how to deal with the challenges facing complex project management in the light of the prevailing global social, political and economic environment. Rather than dissecting the issue and focusing on the parts alone, as the industry had tried to do in the past, the group adopted a broad, systems-wide view which certainly included the examination of individual components, but also asked whether the larger system in which programme leaders and project managers operate is also in need of transformation. The theme chosen was “Complexity in a Time of Global Financial Change: Program Delivery for the New Economy”.

Prior to the first formal Roundtable meeting 16 members of the ICCPM community participated in a preliminary on-line workshop to understand the issues in order to prepare the questions for the series, and to generate ideas from which to prepare a discussion paper as stimulus/pre-reading.

From an analysis of the results of the preliminary workshop, it was determined that the issues confronting the complex project management community are systemic, connected and evolving/transforming. It was clear that the current methods of governance – both for individual projects and for systems-of-systems – is inadequate and that new and enhanced approaches are required to deliver complex projects in the light of the highly cross-connected and increasing interdependences in the prevailing global environment.

Four roundtable events were held, in Canberra, Lille, London and Washington DC, using the discussing paper as a base from which to start. This report details their response, beginning with an analysis of the problem situation, discussing the issues raised thereby in respect to Complex Project Management with additional input from the related ICCPM research initiative RP4 that addressed complexity drivers, and offers recommendations both for immediate action, strategic planning and policy formation.

2. Executive Summary

Globalisation and interconnectedness mean that projects can no longer be regarded in isolation from the internal and external environments in which they operate.

This demands a comprehensive and up-to-date awareness of changes in that environment, both current and possible in future.

It is essential that the degree of project complexity is assessed at the outset and monitored throughout project execution. The more complex the project, the more likely it is to be susceptible to external events.

These events are outside the project sphere of influence and incapable of being controlled; project delivery leadership must therefore be flexible enough to respond quickly and appropriately. It must also be adept at 'influencing' through the understanding and integration of the interests of multiple, often competing, groups of stakeholders.

Complex projects cannot be delivered using existing linear project management tools and techniques alone. While important, reliance on rigorous process compliance is insufficient.

Instead, projects must be regarded as complex adaptive systems – defined as groups of systems that interact and influence each other, evolving over time as a result of that interaction – and managed as such.

This requires a new set of methods and approaches, including systems thinking, experiential learning, evolutionary contracting, managing for outcome and a much greater degree of customer/supplier co-operation, with the entire supply chain working as one team.

Additionally, it is important that Project Management issues are taken into consideration when engaged in organisational strategic and tactical planning and that stakeholders are engaged throughout the planning stages rather than 'sold to' once plans are in place.

All of these boil down to this:

The time has come to reorient our perspective; from a solely linear, 'inside the project' focus to a holistic view that includes the linear, but also enables us to think and act from a point of higher leverage, thus ensuring that we have the information and capability to steer projects dynamically in times of high complexity, ambiguity and rapid change.

On the ground, we must be aware of what's going on outside as well as inside the project; be able to acknowledge and integrate multiple, often competing, interests; be flexible enough to respond; and if necessary, change direction without apology.

More detailed discussion and recommendations for action are given in Chapter 7 of this document.

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About ICCPM

Based in Australia, and with Partners and Associates worldwide, ICCPM is a not-for-profit organisation developing research and delivering education and support services to businesses and government to get the world's most complex projects back on track. Some projects are now so complex that a different management approach is needed to break the common cycle of delay, cost overruns and failure. It doesn't matter which field you are in, ICCPM can provide the tools, research and education to improve organisational delivery capability and opportunities for investment in research that will lead to successful delivery on complex projects and programs.

For further details, please go to the ICCPM website www.iccpm.com

Contact us at admin@iccpm.com or telephone +61 2 6120 5110

