ne of the goals, perhaps even an obligation, of the Project Management Institute is to support research that will advance the state of the art—that will advance the understanding and subsequent codification of project management as a defined discipline. Research efforts speak to the public through Project Management Journal, periodic international symposia, and specific study reports. One such study is Patterns of Effective Management of Virtual Projects: An Exploratory Study by Deepak Khazanchi and Ilze Zigurs of the College of Information Science and Technology, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Those involved in day-to-day project management may tend to overlook or even dismiss research reports as esoteric, academic mumbo-jumbo that is more a matter for tweeds and briers than the rough-and-tumble world of getting things done. Doing so, especially in this case, would be a mistake. There is much of practical value to take directly from this study.

The authors’ goal was to provide a blueprint of best practices in virtual projects that combines different perspectives on the subject with skills and technology in a seamless way. Like all research reports, it is peppered throughout with parenthetical identifiers of authors and publication dates. This is useful and necessary information for academic readers who are concerned with documentation and citations. It is less useful, perhaps even a cognitive disruption, for practical readers looking for the bottom line. This aspect of the report is not a detriment; it is a strength of research reports. So, practical readers, be warned and be prepared.

Khazanchi and Zigurs provide a three-stage developmental journey that begins with definition, follows with a discussion of key factors in managing virtual projects, and ends with a proposed typology that brings it all together. They also provide information on methodology, analysis and results, and conclusions. Appendices include tools of the research such as questionnaires and communications to study participants.

Virtual projects exist in varying degrees. The authors discuss “virtuality” in terms of geographic dispersion—perhaps the basis of conventional understanding of “virtual”—process/goals and technology. Readers will find that “virtuality” is more than just a new buzzword. The term encompasses a rich array of elements that combine in confounding ways. Ultimately, virtuality means “the extent to which project members are dispersed on geographical and other dimensions, and rely on information and communication technologies for carrying out project goals.”

Technology and project characteristics get similar definitional treatment as a foundation for what follows. The authors include a discussion of patterns and pattern theory that will provide the framework for the goal of the study, the integrated blueprint.

In stage two of the journey, the authors address three key factors for managing virtual projects: communication, coordination, and control. Here is where practical readers should begin to pay close attention. The writing continues in a scholarly vein, but many nuggets of application interest lie just below the surface. Readers should diligently sift through this material, mining items of personal relevance.

Stage three of the journey—the proposed typology—provides integration to this point. Readers will find a definition of three types of projects: lean, hybrid, and extreme. Then, they will find a table, simple and direct, that discloses the relationships among the virtual project types, the three key factors of management concern, the effects on project virtuality, and the technology needed for successful implementation. This is not just a research result. It is a summary of important insights and tips of enormous and immediate practical value.

The following two chapters, 5 (Methodology for Data Collection) and 6 (Analysis and Results), may seem to be of principal interest to academic readers. Practical readers should spend some time on Section 6.3, Patterns for Effective Management of Virtual Projects. They will likely find the real gems of value among the many patterns described, all presented in a common format of name, context, problem, and solution.

In the report’s conclusions, Khazanchi and Zigurs note that patterns were derived from a limited data set, so generalization must be limited. They note that communication is a fundamental necessity, but also that distributed project management tools seem to be little used.

Patterns of Effective Management of Virtual Projects truly serves two masters. It is a strong research report that makes a significant contribution to the theory of project management. It is also a disclosure of data highly relevant to the practice of project management. Readers from both communities—academics and practitioners—will find something of value.

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