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Sustainability in Project Management

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INTRODUCTION

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1.1 WHY THIS BOOK?

‘Panta rhei’ was the immortal wisdom, spoken over 2,500 years ago by the Greek philosopher Herakleitos. ‘Everything flows’; everything changes and nothing remains the same. More than ever, this is true for the competitive environment of many organizations. Whether resulting from technological progress, new regulations, globalizing economy or inventive competitors, new developments change the marketplace every day. Organizations are continuously reacting to these changes, or anticipating new ones, by introducing new products and services, improving business processes, changing resources, expanding their activities or discarding obsolete activities. Selecting the right changes and organizing and managing them in an effective and efficient way is, for many organizations, a critical success factor for business agility and continuous success. Many of these changes are managed as projects: unique efforts that require the mobilization of resources of different disciplines, capabilities and organizational units. Project management is developing into the key organizational skill in order to execute these changes in a controlled manner.

However, an increasingly dynamic environment is not the only development organizations face. In the last ten to 15 years, the concept of sustainability has also grown in recognition and importance. For example, the pressure on companies to broaden their reporting and accountability from economic performance for shareholders, to sustainability performance for all stakeholders has increased (Visser 2002). The 2009–2010 world crises may even imply that a strategy focused solely on shareholder value is no longer viable (Kennedy 2000). Also following the success of Al Gore’s ‘inconvenient truth’, awareness seems to be growing that a change of mindset is needed, both in consumer behaviour as in corporate policies. How can we develop prosperity without compromising the life of future generations? Proactively or reactively, companies are looking for ways to integrate ideas of sustainability in their marketing, corporate communications, annual reports and in their actions (Hedstrom et al. 1998; Holliday 2001). Sustainability, in this context, can be defined as: ‘Adopting business strategies and activities that meet

the needs of the enterprise and its stakeholders today while protecting, sustaining and enhancing the human and natural resources that will be needed in the future' (International Institute for Sustainable Development and Deloitte & Touche 1992).

The concept of sustainability has more recently also been linked to project management (Gareis et al. 2009 and 2011; Silvius et al. 2009 and 2010). Association for Project Management (APM) (past) Chairman Tom Taylor recognizes that 'the planet earth is in a perilous position with a range of fundamental sustainability threats' and 'Project and Programme Managers are significantly placed to make contributions to Sustainable Management practices' (Association for Project Management 2006). And at the 22nd World Congress of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in 2008, IPMA Vice-President Mary McKinlay stated in the opening keynote speech that 'the further development of the project management profession requires project managers to take responsibility for sustainability' (McKinlay 2008). Her statement summarized the development of project management as a profession as she foresees it. In this vision, project managers need to take a broad view of their role and to evolve from 'doing things right' to 'doing the right things right'. This implies taking responsibility for the results of their projects, including the sustainability aspects of such results. Furthermore, the relationship between project management and sustainability is explored in academic studies (for example, by Gareis et al. 2009; Labuschagne and Brent 2006), as one of the necessary (future) developments in project management.

How does this attention for sustainability find its way to the shop floor? How is sustainability taken into account in project management processes, methodologies and competencies? Is it a point of concern there? If organizations 'put their money where their mouth is' on sustainability, it is inevitable that sustainability criteria and indicators will find their way into project management methodologies and practices in the very near future (Silvius et al. 2009).

This book explores the concept of sustainability and its application to projects and project management. It identifies the questions surrounding the integration of the concepts of sustainability within projects and project management and suggests answers to these questions. Or, when answers are not available, the book provides insights that may lead to more informed considerations. By doing this, the book aims to contribute to the further development of the project management profession.

For this reason, the book is, in the first place, aimed at project management professionals. It is this group that will be faced with an increasing demand for demonstrating sustainability in their work. But the responsibility for sustainability in projects also rests with general managers, project sponsors, project management office (PMO) leaders and other stakeholders in the context of projects. They represent the second group that this book is aimed at. The third and final group

this book targets is educators and students in the field of project management and general management. They represent the future of projects and the project management profession, and should understand the developments that shape the project manager of the future: a project manager who takes responsibility for a sustainable future.

1.2 WHY SUSTAINABILITY IN PROJECTS AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT?

The rationale for studying the integration of sustainability is multiple. Firstly, the recognition that the current ways of exploiting the earth's natural resources are not sustainable, logically leads to the conclusion that we need to change the way we do things and/or the things we do. We need to change the way we use resources, produce products, make our preferences, share our wealth, and so on. And this change is inescapably related to innovation and projects. Sustainable development therefore needs projects to realize change. Secondly, this change is also related to the strategies of companies and other organizations. Organizations are moving towards sustainability and this influences the projects they undertake, but also the way they execute their projects. Sustainability therefore changes the profession of project management. This development provides a third reason for this book. Project management is developing into a 'true' profession and with this profession comes a professional responsibility. Perhaps even an ethical responsibility. Project managers should therefore take responsibility for integrating sustainability into their work.

However, ... if integrating considerations of sustainability in projects and project management is so logical and evident, would that not suggest that it is already being done? In other words, what's new? Isn't sustainability just another hype that suggests a radical innovation, but in reality is 'old hat'?

We aim to also address this question in this book. We hope to show the implications the concepts of sustainability may have on projects and project management and how these changes the profession of project management. Old hat? We'll reflect on that in Chapter 5.

1.3 OUR CORE MESSAGE

The core message of this book is a call to the project management profession. A call to understand that project managers can and should take responsibility for contributing to sustainable development by organizations and businesses. A call to stand up and be a specialist in change – sustainable change – which involves professional autonomy, professional responsibility and ethical behaviour.

In addition to being a call for action, the book is also a guide for this action. It provides practical guidance on how to integrate the concepts of sustainability in the way organisations execute, manage and govern projects.

This book is about project management as a profession. We support the opinion of Mary McKinlay that the further development of this profession requires project managers to take responsibility for sustainability. If project managers position themselves as subordinates of project sponsors and ‘just do as they are told’, without taking up a more autonomous responsibility, they cannot expect organizations and businesses to fully appreciate the significance of project management. Project managers should be the ‘peers’ of their project sponsors, specialized in organizational change and managing temporary organizations.

The book is also for individuals. Individuals that work in teams or with teams on projects. Individuals with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal values. Sustainability relates to personal values in terms of ethics, fairness, equality, responsibility and accountability. We hope to inspire these individuals to be aware of their personal values, and to apply these to the different roles they play in projects and change. We hope to inspire them to think about professionalism and professional responsibilities.

1.4 HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book ‘translates’ the concepts of sustainability into practically applicable insights on the integration of sustainability in projects and project management. Figure 1.1 shows this overall structure, from the exploration of the concepts of sustainability to practical steps to get started.

A brief introduction to the chapters:

Chapter 2, Sustainability in Business, provides an introduction into and an overview of the concepts of sustainability. It will be interesting to readers who want to understand these concepts and their relevance to doing business. The concepts of sustainability are summarized in six principles of sustainability that form the foundation for the analysis in the further chapters of the book.

Chapter 3, Sustainability and Projects, provides a brief introduction into the specific characteristics of projects and analyses the application of the principles of sustainability to projects. This chapter is directed at readers who want to understand the background and conceptual implications of the integration of the concepts for sustainability in projects and project management. The chapter concludes with a definition of sustainability in projects and project management and a checklist of sustainability aspects of projects.

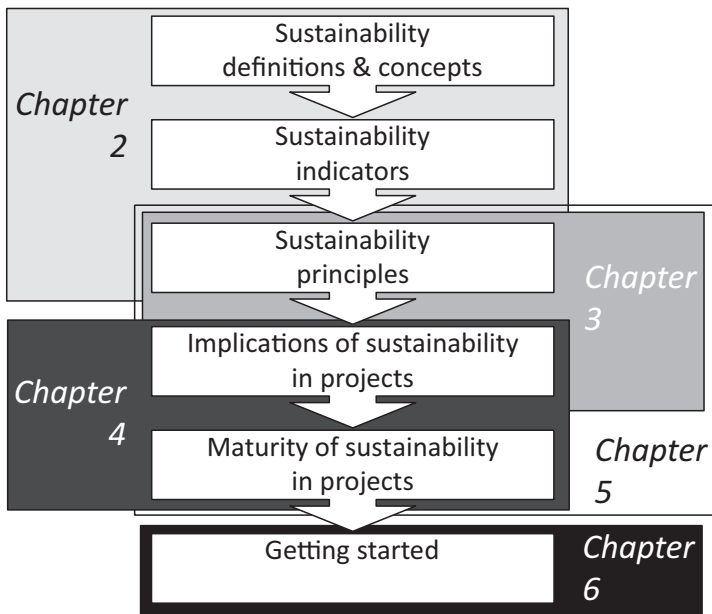


Figure 1.1 The overall structure of this book

Chapter 4, *Incorporating Sustainability in Project Management*, analyses the implications of the principles of sustainability, and the checklist of sustainability aspects. It discusses these implications initially at the level of the project (project management processes, maturity of sustainability integration); secondly at the level of the project manager (competences, ethical considerations); and thirdly at the level of the organization (project governance, organizational maturity). This is a practical chapter with specific analysis of the most commonly used project management standards, and suggestions and tools for the integration of sustainability in projects and project management. Therefore it is relevant to all readers.

Chapter 5, *Reflection and Conclusion*, is a more reflective and conclusive chapter. It is in this chapter that we will address the question posed in the previous section: Isn't sustainability just 'business as usual'? This chapter also addresses the relationship between sustainability, ethics and professionalism in project management. It is relevant for those who want to have a deeper understanding of what sustainability in projects and project management implies on a more philosophical level.

The final chapter, Chapter 6 *Getting Started*, provides practical guidelines to 'get started' with the integration of sustainability in projects and project management. This chapter is organized into the different roles surrounding projects. It is

especially relevant for practitioners in these roles who wish to understand what they can do tomorrow to start taking responsibility for a more sustainable future.

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