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CONFERENCE NOTE

Project Management and sustainability - review of the 4th IPMA Research Conference 2016

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Introduction

The 4th IPMA Research Conference was held on *Project Management and Sustainability* in Reykjavik, Iceland from September 14th - 16th 2016. In this short review we give a general outline of the structure of the conference, the main findings and what they mean for the project management community.

Structure of the conference and keynotes

The IPMA research conferences are no typical conferences. The structure and work methods are thoroughly prepared and selected presenters are invited to come and inspire the participants with their lectures on chosen topics. The value lies primarily in what happens during the presentations, in the discussions, workshops, world café sessions and networking that takes place when people with different backgrounds and perspectives meet to discuss important subjects. The following figure shows the structure of the 4th IPMA research conference.

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Figure 1 Program structure of the 4th IPMA research conference

The IPMA research conferences always open with a conference dinner to make the participants familiar with each other. A group of MPM¹ students from Reykjavik University presented the basic definitions of sustainability and introduced the message of the Paris convention in 2015. Dr. Yvonne Schoper (Germany) opened the next morning the conference with a keynote presentation on the future trends that will shape our lives and our profession in the coming decades: World population growth, climate change, water, agriculture & forest, economy & trade, energy & power, technology development, mobility & transportation, human development and people's values.

The keynote by Dr. Schoper was followed by a workshop where the participants worked in four groups on four different topics, inspired by the keynote of Dr. Schoper.

Dr. Gilbert Silvius (Netherlands) opened the afternoon session with a keynote with the topic "What is currently being done regarding sustainability, what is the gap?" He showed that sustainability has become a core issue for large international corporations. But a lot of work remains to be done - as there is a gap between what is being done and what needs to be done. For example, sustainability should be an integral part of the bodies of knowledge for project management, which is the case with the new ICB² of IPMA.

Dr. Peter Morris (UK), the legendary project management scholar opened the next day with a keynote speech on the topic "How to close the gap – focus on project management." His talk evolved around what is currently happening in the world and he argued that we should focus on climate change and how to deal with it before it is too late. He was followed by Michael Young (Australia) who gave a keynote on the topic "How to close the gap – focus on project outcomes." He showed the dramatic changes that are already happening as a result of climate change, for example in the great barrier reef in Australia where the corals have recently been severely damaged because of the increased sea temperature. On the bright side, he showed that there is a growing awareness in the project management community with the introduction of sustainability standards.

The keynotes were followed by a world café session that had the purpose to summarize the conference contents in specific topics, all with emphasis on what professionals and stakeholders in project management can do regarding sustainability:

1. What can project managers do regarding sustainability?
2. What can project owners and project sponsors do regarding sustainability?
3. What can single points of accountability for project success do regarding sustainability?
4. What can institutions like IPMA and the Member Associations do regarding sustainability?

1 Master of Project Management.

2 ICB is the abbreviation for the Individual Competence Baseline of IPMA.

5. What sustainability competences can be brought to projects?
6. What are the 7 deadly sins regarding sustainable project management?
7. What should be the content of ICB / OCB³ / PEB⁴ regarding sustainability?
8. What makes sustainable leadership in projects?

The conference finished with a one-day excursion to see geothermal and hydro power stations and get an impression on the efforts of the Icelandic society towards climate neutrality. No other nation uses such a high proportion of renewable energy resources.

Overview of conference outcomes

The discussions by the conference participants from over 20 countries revealed the mutual perception that the project management profession has a great responsibility for the global future development. Our profession deals with the management of projects as business. The participants agreed that project management practitioners cannot only finger point to the different project roles and argue that sustainability is the responsibility of the project principals or sponsors. As project management has become the way of doing business a new holistic way of thinking is needed in every project manager worldwide. This includes the will and capability to understand the wider issues, the larger scale and the impact of every single project on sustainability, and to readjust their individual attitudes and values. Consequently the important competencies needed for project practitioners in the future are systems thinking, understanding that projects are not isolated but part of a larger context – along with a deeper understanding of the three dimensions of sustainability: social, environmental and economic. No less important are an attitude of integrity and an ethical judgement to make decisions for the greater good. These competences and characteristics will be necessary in a world where sustainability is a key element in project management.

A further question is what does this mean for project stakeholders and those who practice project management? Project managers have a great impact on how sustainability is taken into account in projects. The extent to which they are informed about sustainability - and their attitude - are crucial success factors for sustainability of projects and sustainable project management. Project owners, project sponsors, single points of accountability for project success - all of these stakeholders must become aware of their responsibility for sustainability in their organisations, and willing to push for sustainable thinking in the projects. The same applies to the project management associations as they influence the discussion, inform the profession and develop the education standards. They should take the various aspects of sustainability into account in their bodies of knowledge and define ethical codes of professional conduct that include sustainability for project managers. With these new measures the intention and behavior of project managers will be newly shaped, which was the common understanding of the conference.

The world is facing huge problems that can only be solved by joint efforts, consensus, mutual understanding and the shared will to change things for a better future. It was a common understanding in the conference that our project management profession has a responsibility. Sustainability needs to be part of our mindsets as professional project managers.

3 OCB is the abbreviation for the Organisational Competence Baseline of IPMA.

4 PEB is the abbreviation for the Project Excellence Baseline by IPMA.

Taking sustainability seriously needs to become an integral part of every professional body of knowledge in project, program and portfolio management worldwide.

The IPMA Research Awards

The formal ceremony where the winners of the IPMA research awards receive their rewards and present their research is a festive moment at the IPMA research conferences. The IPMA research awards consist of three categories. The winner of IPMA Research Awards 2016 was Dr. Ofer Zwikael from the Australian National University for his contribution to knowledge on project benefit management. The winner of the Young Researcher Awards 2016 was Maxim Miterev, Ph.D. student at KTH in Sweden and Politecnico di Milano in Italy for his research “Exploring program management competences for various program types.” Finally, IPMA awarded Dr. Christophe N. Bredillet, professor at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières in Canada for the 2016 Research Achievement Award for his contribution to the philosophy of science with respect to complex project management.

About the authors

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