The Future of Project Management

William R. Duncan

To begin, I should note that I have no special knowledge, skills, or experience that would qualify me to predict the future. I have never won the lottery. The stocks I buy go down. My favorite sports teams only win when I *don't* bet on them. As a result, I have placed bets on Brazil, Spain, Italy, Argentina, and Portugal to win the World Cup in hopes that this strategy will allow the USA to sneak through.

On the other hand, my oldest son was wise enough at the age of 8 to suggest that we plan on rain any time the meteorologist predicted sunshine. And there are a great many economists, politicians, and central bankers who make a good living without ever being right. So if we view the glass as "half full," then I can assure you that my predictions should be treated with the same reverence as those of Alan Greenspan.

Why Try to Predict the Future?

There is one major reason: to make better decisions. If you knew that the iPod was going to be such a huge success, you would have bought Apple stock. If you knew that nerd you dated in high school was going to become a millionaire, you would have been nicer to them. If you knew that the web was going to be so amazing, you would have taken that course on Java programming instead of the one on Advanced Cobol Data Structures.

And even if you are wrong, your predictions could become famous:

- Irving Fisher, a professor at Yale University and probably the most famous economist of his time, noted in October 1929 that "stocks have reached a permanently high plateau." Fortunately, he already had tenure.
- Arthur C. Clarke, science fiction writer and noted futurist, predicted in 1966 that "houses will be able to fly [by the year 2000]." Singapore Airlines does offer suites with showers and real beds on some of their flights, but that isn't what he meant.
- Ken Olsen, CEO of Digital Equipment Corporation, asserted in 1977 that "there is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." I agree. One is not nearly enough. There are currently five in my home, ten if you count iPods and smart phones as computers.

The Prediction Process
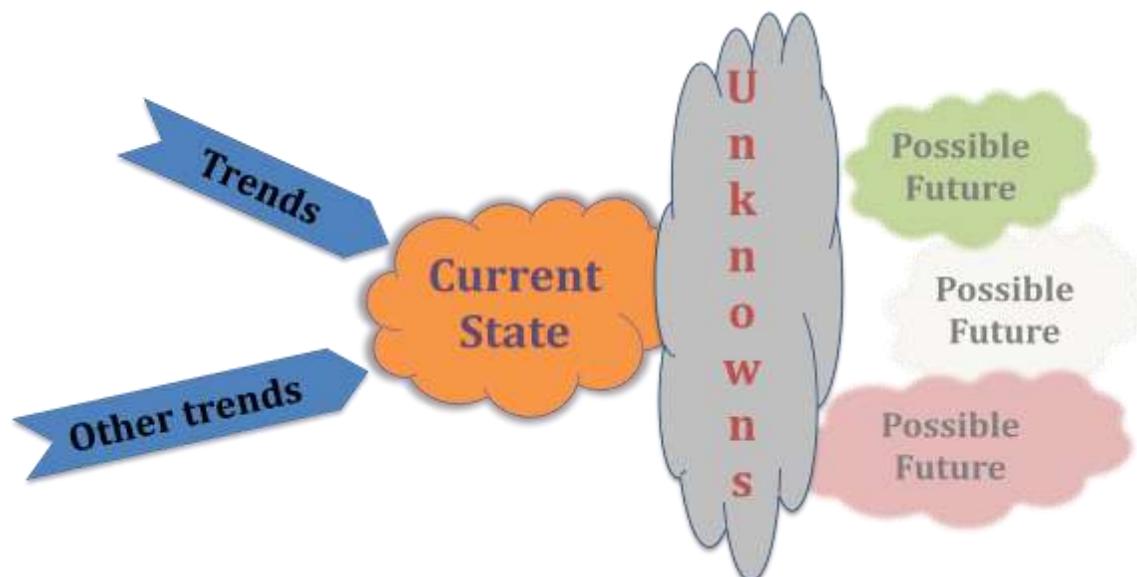
The graphic above provides a generic view of the process of prognostication. The current state is where we are today: If our current state were different, the same trends could lead to different futures.

There are a variety of trends pushing us in certain directions, but we can't be sure which ones will continue or which ones are strongest. Finally, the unknowns make it impossible for us to be certain about where those trends may lead. I'll use this model to organize the rest of this article.

Current State of Project Management

It would seem that project management is at the forefront of business today:

- Google shows over 33,700,000 hits on "project management."
- There are over 200 universities around the globe that offer educational programs in project management, and maybe 50 of those include academic credit.
- There are about 50,000 individuals with advanced, competence based certifications and another 450,000 with knowledge-based credentials.

Except:

- "Marketing" produces over 500,000,000 hits and "engineering" 370,000,000, so we still have a ways to go.
- Most of the universities that offer project management programs are what I would classify as second- and third-tier schools. For example, MIT offers only a single course on project management.
- A recent study estimated that there were 12,000,000 project managers around the world, so about 2% of them have professional credentials.

In addition, our so-called professional societies are engaged in competition, not collaboration. When the Association of Project Managers in the UK applied for "chartered" status, not everyone was happy. Why wouldn't everyone in the project management community support this effort to have the discipline formally recognized as a profession?

Easy. Certification is big business. If APM controls the definition of project management professionalism, they also control the massive cash-flows related to certification. Most project management professional associations today generate more annual revenue from certification than from dues. And the profit margins on credentials are also substantially greater.

By the way … if you're looking for project management credentials, and you are on a limited budget, there are several websites that offer certification for around $50.

Another thing that strikes me about the current state of our discipline is that while we know a lot about project management, we really don't know much about *good* project management:

- There is no accepted theory of project management, and it doesn't appear that many academics are working to remedy this deficiency.
- There are no accepted first principles of project management. For example, most people seem to accept that a project should have a plan, but there is little agreement about when that plan should be developed, what should be in it, or how detailed it should be.
- There is no shared language. South America has at least 6 different terms for "work breakdown structure." In the USA, we can't agree on what a WBS looks like. Mandarin has no word for "program."

There is also a plentitude of misinformation. My current complaint is that most everyone seems to have forgotten about the importance of the project life-cycle. I searched Amazon and none of the top 20 project management books cover the subject. Losing sight of the project life-cycle means losing sight of what scope really is. It is pretty hard to be successful as a project manager if you can't tell when your scope has changed.

Selected Trends

Everyone seems to agree that globalization is the wave of the future. Here's a quote from some noted thinkers:

> "Modern industry has established the world market. All old-established national industries have been destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries whose products are consumed in every corner of the

globe. … All fixed, fast-frozen relations are swept away; all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air."

Does this sound like the world you know? If so, it would seem that we are living in a static world since these words were written by Marx and Engels in 1848 as part of their *Communist Manifesto*. Maybe things today aren't really so different …

At the same time, Bruce Nussbaum, writing in *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, predicts a backlash against the current globalization that will encourage increased nationalism. He also expects the Chinese economy to stall … and crash … with the resultant economic dislocation leading to military conflict between the USA and China as well as between China and India. I hope he is wrong.

Wired magazine sees a trend toward wider use of drug delivery patches. They suggest that by 2020, we will have meal replacement patches. This would be a boon for project managers everywhere: no need for lunch breaks!

BT Futura, a part of British Telecom, anticipates that the current trend toward smarter and more sophisticated software and hardware will produce systems that understand text and drawings. They also think that the trend toward virtual companies will continue. What are the implications for project management?

- Project planning will be automated. IT project plans will be created directly from a list of agreed requirements. Construction projects will be planned directly from the architect's and engineer's drawings.
- Project managers will increasingly work at home. They may even be able to learn their children's names when they work 80 hours a week at home instead of in their offices!

COSMOS magazine sees global warming as real. Rising seas could make emergency project management a hot growth sector, and Dutch Dike Engineers will be able to double or triple their billing rates. *COSMOS* also expects that current trends in medicine will produce a true cure for cancer by 2020. If so, this will generate a huge increase in productivity along with a possible collapse of a major segment of the biotech research industry. Let's hope that the former outweighs the latter.

My Predictions for 2020

Perhaps I am being naïve, but I don't believe that project management is going away. There have always been projects. There will always be projects. There have always been project managers. There will always be project managers.

I do expect, however, that project management will re-segment by application area. I don't think that project managers in IT, construction, defense, and biotech will ever agree on a common set of terms for similar concepts because there are real differences. The owner role in construction isn't quite the same as the sponsor of an IT project. Biotech will never call their customers users. The defense industry will never recognize that most of their programs are really projects.

As a result, international project management associations will face increased competition from established, national engineering societies, especially in the area of certification. The vast majority of project managers will never work on a project that crosses international boundaries and even fewer will cross application area boundaries. Employers prefer to hire someone who has proven their ability to manage a specific type of project rather than someone who has passed a generic test of generic terms.

For this same reason, I think no one will notice when ISO 21500 is finally approved. They will claim compliance if anyone asks, but they won't actually use the terminology or the approach.

I also think that the attempts of the project management community to make project management "strategic" will fail. I expect that Project Portfolio Management will be assigned to the Finance Department and will be

integrated with capital budgeting. On the plus side, this means that fewer projects with weak business cases will be approved. In particular, chronic over-commitment within IT will cease.

Are these truly predictions — what I think will happen? Or are they only wishes — what I want to see happen? Probably a little of both. One thing that I am absolutely certain of is this: project management will continue to be easy to understand and hard to do.

About the Author

William R. Duncan is the principal of Project Management Partners, a project management consulting and training firm headquartered in Lexington, MA USA. He currently chairs the Board of PMCert, the certification body of the American Society for Advancement of Project Management (asapm). In addition, he is the former Director of Standards for both *asapm* and the Project Management Institute, Inc. (USA).

Mr. Duncan has over thirty years of management and consulting experience including five years with a major international consulting firm. He was the primary author of the original (1996) version of A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. With over 2,000,000 copies distributed worldwide, this seminal work is the most widely used project management guide in the world today. In addition, his "process model" of project management was used to organize ISO 10006, Guidelines for quality in project management.

Mr. Duncan has authored over 40 articles for publications such as The Project Management Journal, PMNetwork, Projects@Work, and Chief Projects Officer. He has been chosen "Speaker of the Year" by three different project management professional associations. He has presented papers at conferences sponsored by asapm, PMI, AIPM, IPMA, FOSTAS, and others.

He continues his extensive volunteer service as one of the founding members of the Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards (GAPPS) which has recently published a framework for global performance-based competency standards for project managers.

Mr. Duncan has helped clients in North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia improve their organizational competence in project management. Major clients include Camp Dresser & McKee, China National Communications, Codelco, EMC2, Entergy Corporation, First Data Resources, Golden Telecom, Investors Group, Liberty Mutual Insurance, Manitoba Telephone, One-S, Polaroid, Schlumberger, Sybase, and Texas Instruments.

He has also been called upon to provide expert testimony regarding proper project management processes for a major US law firm.

He is a 1970 graduate of Brown University in Providence, RI and has done post-graduate work at Boston University and Northeastern.

Significant consulting engagements include:

• Development of a project manager competency model and career ladder for a large engineering consulting firm. The competency model was used to ensure that the company's most critical projects were being managed by their best project managers. The career ladder included criteria for promotion as well as a recognition and reward system that was integrated with the firm's personnel processes.

- Facilitation of a project start-up workshop for a consumer products company. The workshop extended over a two week period and included 25 people. As a result of the workshop, the organization was able to cut nearly two months off the expected project duration — saving nearly $1,000,000.

Mr. Duncan has also developed numerous training programs including:

- Mastering Modern Project Management, a three day introduction to project management that uses the participants' own projects for casework to ensure that they can use what they learn immediately back on the job.
- Project Risk Management, a two day program that takes participants from identifying and describing project risks through evaluating alternative responses.
- Project Portfolio Management, a two day program that shows participants how to align — and keep aligned! — their project portfolios with the strategic direction of their organization.

To see more of Duncan's insights, go to his blog on the *asapm* website: www.asapm.org/blog/.

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