



Peter Morris's Early Contribution to Understanding the Success and Failure of Major Projects

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Abstract

This essay reflects how the author got to know Peter Morris and his work, and how that work has gone on to influence both the thinking and the practice of project management through Peter's significant contribution. From his time and work with the Major Projects Association, through to the important books he wrote, Peter Morris has drawn from both theory and extensive case study research to inform our understanding of the factors, drivers, and issues that contribute to a project's success or failure.

Keywords

Major Projects Association, preconditions for project success or failure, case studies,

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ESSAY

I first met Peter Morris at a seminar of the Major Projects Association (MPA) in September 1986. At the seminar, Peter and George Hough presented the results of their research into the preconditions of success and failure of major projects, (Morris & Hough, 1986). That report appeared the next year as the book, *The Anatomy of Major Projects*, (Morris & Hough, 1987). I believe that that book is a classic of mega-project management. Bent Flyvbjerg conducted a survey to identify classics of megaproject management, (Flyvbjerg & Turner, 2018). Bent agreed with me that the book was worthy of being considered a classic, but his survey identified no classics.

The MPA was first proposed in 1980, and founded in 1982, (Morris, 1985), with the aim of developing a better understanding of major projects through a multi-disciplined approach, to draw conclusions and develop methods for their management, (Morris & Hodgson, 1985). At the time it consisted of about 50 member organizations, representing a range of contributors to major projects including government, construction companies, banks, lawyers, insurance companies and others. Its first executive director was Patrick Hodgson, and in September 1986, Peter Morris was a research fellow. Patrick Hodgson retired shortly afterwards and Peter became executive director.

The purpose of the MPA is to improve the performance of major projects, and Morris (1985) says its particular focus at the time was initiation, assessment, securing and accomplishment. The MPA was interested in the causes of success and failure of major projects from the start, Morris (1986), and that led to the research projects conducted by Peter Morris and George Hough, (Morris

& Hough, 1986). Following the trend of the time (Müller & Jugdev, 2012), the focus was on success factors, that is, the elements of a project and project management that can be influenced to increase the likelihood of success and failure. Morris (1986), Morris (1988a) and Morris & Hough (1986) say the focus is on “preconditions” of success and failure. As was also common at the time, (Müller & Jugdev, 2012), the focus is on what Cooke-Davies (2002) later called project management success, that is achieving what I consider to be the wretched triple constraint of delivering the desired project output to time, cost and performance. Morris & Hough (1987) say at the start of the third paragraph, “A project is undertaken to achieve a specified objective, defined usually in terms of technical performance, budget and schedule.” Nothing about achieving business objectives. Morris (1988a) defines failure in terms of being late and overspent. It was only later that people began to define success in terms of achieving desired business objectives, (Turner, 2014, first edition 1993). Achieving the desired business objectives was defined by Cooke-Davies (2002) as project success, and by Shenhar & Dvir (2007) as customer success and business success. Turner & Xue (2018) make the point that with the Thames Barrier, one of Morris & Hough’s (1986.1987) case studies, despite being 100% late and 100% overspent (allowing for inflation) it still repaid its investment. But Turner & Xue (2018) also make the point that they were very lucky because there was no flood in the 8 years it took them to build it. Although Morris & Hough’s (1987) do follow the thinking at the time and focus on project management success, and clearly define that as the main objective of the project, they also point to the need to achieve the desired business outcomes. For instance,

figure 10.1 says the ultimate objective of building an oil field is to maximise daily production.

In Morris (1988a), Peter conducted and reports on a literature review and identified several maxims for project success:

- project definition
- planning, design and technology management
- politics
- schedule duration
- schedule urgency
- finance

- legal agreements
- contractual matters
- project implementation
- human factors

From this he derived a list of hypotheses about preconditions for success or failure on major projects, as shown in Table 1. He then conducted deductive research, studying eight case studies to test the twenty-two hypotheses against performance on those case studies.

Table 1: Research hypotheses for preconditions of success or failure on major projects

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Description</i>
Project definition	1. unclear objectives 2. changes to commercial, technical, cost and schedule specifications
Technical	3. the amount of technical uncertainty 4. problems in coordinating project interfaces, (Morris, 1988b) 5. design management
Finance	6. amount of finance required 7. mix of public and private sources of finance 8. financial risk 9. difficulty forecasting final cost
Environmental, social and political pressures	10. physical challenges 11. political, social, community, environmental and other external factors
Schedule	12. duration 13. urgency 14. gateway reviews 15. changes in government
Managerial and organizational factors	16. legal agreements, contract strategy and terms and condition 17. organization structure 18. leadership 19. human factors and teamwork 20. labour relations 21. communication 22. human error, incompetence, incapacity and incapability

The case studies were:

1. The Channel Tunnel, 1960-1975, that is the attempt that was cancelled by the Labour government in 1975
2. Concorde (Anglo-French supersonic passenger jet)
3. The Advanced passenger Train
4. The Thames barrier
5. Heysham 2 Nuclear Power Station and the Advanced Gas Reactor Program
6. The Fulmar North Sea Oil Field
7. The Computerization of PAYE

8. Project Giotto (European spacecraft to intercept Halley’s Comet)

From this he developed a model for success factors on major projects. A simplified version appears in his book about the history of project management, (Morris, 1994), as shown in Figure 1. A more detailed version appears on the last page of Morris & Hough (1987). Versions of this model continue to be used to represent success factors on projects, (Turner, 2014).

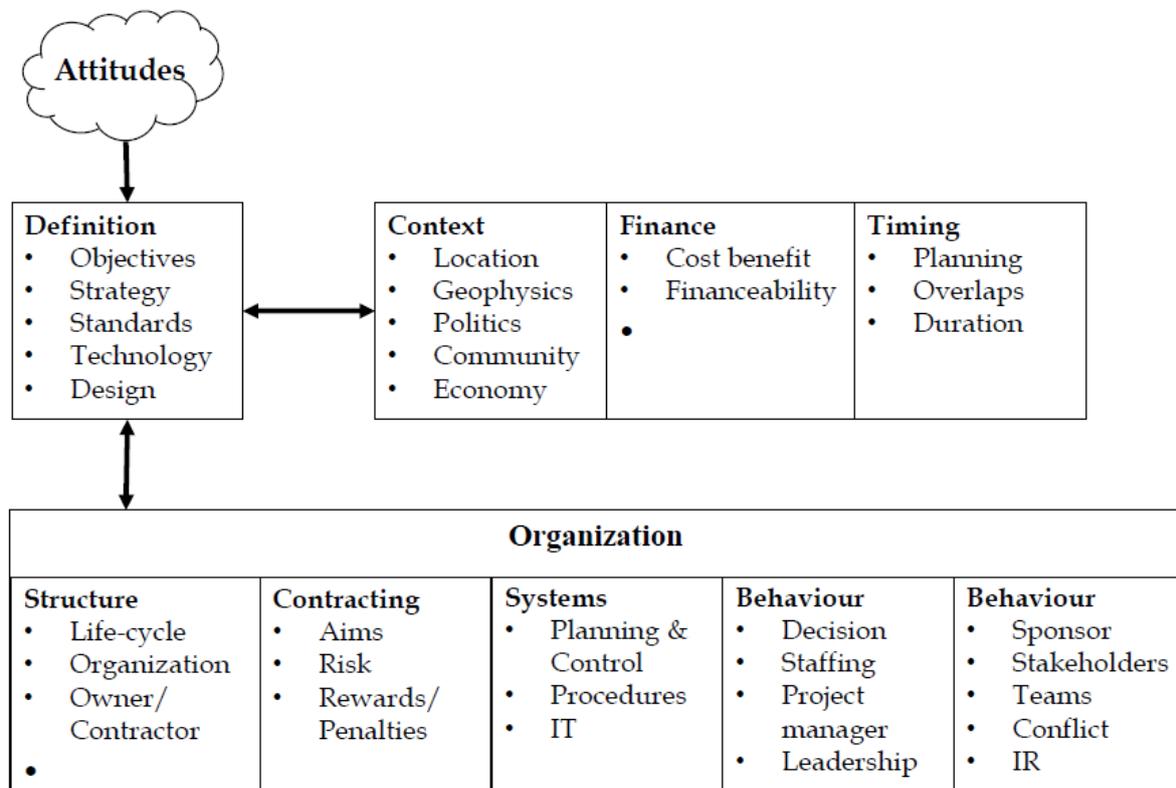


Figure 1: preconditions for success on major projects, (after Morris 1994)

Peter Morris (1994) outlined the model as follows; (I have quoted from the book):

Attitudes: “The project’s definition, its interaction with external, financial and other factors, and its implementation will be much harder to manage, and quite possibly prejudiced, if the attitudes of the parties essential to its success are not positive and

supportive” (Morris, 1994, p.241). This is effectively saying you need to support of stakeholders, (Derakhshan et al, 2019), and so is early recognition of the importance of stakeholder management on projects.

Definition: “A project will be in great danger of encountering serious problems if



its if its objectives, standards, technical base and general strategic planning are inadequately considered or poorly developed, or if its design is not firmly managed in line with its strategic plans” (op cit, p.219).

External factors, finance and timing: “A project’s definition is affected by and affects its external environment” (op cit, p. 231).

Organization: “The project should be organized properly, both internally and with regard to outside parties” (op cit, p. 248). This is also early recognition of the importance of project organization, contributing to work that developed from that point, (Gareis, 1990; Miterev et al, 2017).

Peter Morris made a significant contribution to our understanding of project management success, particularly in identifying success and failure factors, what he called preconditions of success and failure. But having recognised this, it was to be Jeffrey Pinto’s work, based on his PhD, (Pinto and Slevin, 1987, 1988) which captured more attention, perhaps because he publicised it in more widely read journals, perhaps because it was adopted by the Project Management Institute, and perhaps because it contained just ten easily remembered factors. From that early work into success factors, the first development was to identify success criteria, (Wateridge, 1995), and then to differentiate between project success and project management success, (Cooke-Davies, 2002; Shenhar & Dvir, 2007; Turner & Xue, 2018).

Peter also made a significant contribution to the establishment of the Major Project Association as its first research fellow and second executive director. In those roles he

conducted significant early research that developed the understanding at the time and has gone on to make a lasting contribution.

As I said above, I view Morris & Hough (1987) as a classic in megaproject management. I have quoted it often, and it was part of the basis of my paper with Xue Yan, (Turner & Xue, 2018), has guided my thinking in my recent book, (Drouin & Turner, 2022). Whilst Bent Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg & Turner, 2018) did not obtain sufficient support from the survey he conducted for it to be recognised as a classic in mega project management, (noting that nothing was recognised as a classic), both of us think it is worthy of recognition.

MEMORIES

I met Peter Morris over 35 years ago. He has been part of my project management career since the beginning. I was at the time working for Coopers and Lybrand Associates as a project management consultant, having joined them eleven months earlier, and was then time writing my first book, Goal Directed Project Management, (Andersen et al, 1987). I had joined the Association for Project Management earlier that year and I went on to set up the Thames Valley branch of APM, APM’s second branch. Peter was the guest speaker at our first meeting. As always, Peter arrived at the last minute, papers falling out of his briefcase and, as always, there was some good reason why he was delayed.

Peter and I both shared active interest and engagement with the Association for Project Management and in time I was Peter’s successor as chairman of APM. Someone else had been due to become chairman, but because of work commitments he had to stand aside. So I unexpectedly became chairman. I was



hoping to be chairman sometime, but it came earlier than expected. APM's membership doubled during my tenure, but I always felt that had more to do with Peter's contribution than mine. The momentum he built up carried on. Six months after I finished my term of office as chairman of APM, I was elected president of the International Project Management Association. The UK had planned to nominate Peter, but he was unable to do it because of other commitments. Because it was the UK's turn to nominate the president, they turned to me instead and I duly became president. I had hoped to be a vice president of IPMA if not president, but again it came earlier than expected. I remained the youngest ex-president for quite some time. My track record of that time shows a pattern of becoming chairman and president unexpectedly and early because other people had work commitments that meant they had to stand aside, and Peter had a key role both times.

I last met Peter at APM's Honorary Fellow's lunch in February 2020. We managed to squeeze it in just before lockdown started. Unfortunately, the lunch for 2021 was not held, so I missed that opportunity to meet him.

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