UNDERSTANDING THE APPROPRIATION OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT NORMS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN I.T. PROJECTS

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Abstract

This research uses an appropriation perspective to explore how project management norms are concretely used in context. We have drawn on AST (Adaptive Structuration Theory) to study the appropriation of norms by I.T project managers, using three case studies. Direct appropriation moves have been observed from each project manager, as well as faithfulness to the spirit of PM norms. However a thorough analysis of practices reveals that project managers have performed different adaptation moves: They use PM norms with different purposes, and display different attitudes towards norms. These differences result in three different styles of project management. The research brings evidence that PM norms can be appropriated in very different ways. Agency appears to be a major issue in the appropriation process.

Keywords: Project Management, Practices, Norms, Adaptive Structuration Theory.
1 Introduction

From the mid-1970s, managing software projects has become a growing concern amongst practitioners, due to cost overruns, delays or unsatisfied customers. Problems were identified as being often linked to poor project management (PM) (e.g. Brook, 1975; Thayer & Pyster, 1980). Methodological propositions to improve I.T. projects started flourishing in professional publications but also in the academic literature: cost forecasting (e.g. Wolverton, 1974), project control (e.g. Daly, 1976; Zmud, 1980), the project manager’s role (e.g. Dobelis, 1974), corporate policies for software development (e.g. Cooper, 1978), PM tools (Fleischer & Spitler, 1977).

In the 90s, I.S. project failure rates, namely those published by the Standish Group, contributed to the development of a trend toward PM standardization that had been initiated long before in other industries. Professional associations, consultants, textbooks and I.S. curricula contributed to the wide diffusion of formal practices in PM (Mignerat & Rivard, 2012). The implementation of quality management systems (ISO 9000) and the adoption of formal I.T. management procedures (ITIL) had a strong influence on I.S. project management practices. From the 2000s, PM for I.S. projects was generally considered to be similar to PM in other industries (Hartman & Ashrafi, 2002), and the number of certified I.S. project managers began to grow (Biseul, 2003). Offshore software development has been an additional driver towards the adoption of standard PM practices (Murray & Crandall, 2006).

As quality certification and process standardization became a necessity for market access for many companies (Boiral, 2003), research first focussed on the diffusion of PM standard practices and the benefits for project performance (e.g. Raz & Micheal, 2001; Papke-Shields et al., 2010). Acceptance and conformity by project managers were implicitly assumed, even if PM reference books clearly indicate that the norms should be interpreted by project managers. For example, one of the most popular standards (PMI, 2008) includes an opening warning, which recognizes that project managers should decide how to use it. PMBOK® is a « guide rather than a methodology ». It is based on formalized good practices, where good practice « does not mean the knowledge described should be applied uniformly to all projects; the organization and/or PM team is responsible for determining what is appropriate for any given project » (:4). Nevertheless, researchers have drawn attention to possible unexpected consequences of PM standardization on project managers’ creativity and autonomy (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). However research results from field studies suggest that project managers have space for innovating and for acting strategically. Indeed, from a diffusionist perspective, research has found that tools and techniques are not being used consistently; some being extensively used, while others are rarely utilized (e.g. White & Fortune, 2002). The type of project and the context can partially explain variations within usage (Besner & Hobbs, 2008). Other research has shed light on innovative practices, i.e. cases in which project managers innovate because they do not find appropriate responses in the standard practices (e.g. Wu et al., 2011). Some researchers suggest different conceptions of PM work amongst project managers (Chen, 2006), or different attitudes to knowledge sharing regarding the soft skills needed to run effective IT projects (Petter & Randolph, 2009). Institutionalist research also suggests different attitudes concerning PM norms; when asked to use formalized practices, I.S. project managers can respond with different behavior, varying from passive conformity to active resistance (Mignerat & Rivard, 2010).

From the above findings, we can conclude that PM norms are not used in a similar way by all project managers. This is consistent with a structurationist view of social systems, as developed by Giddens (1984): “Rules and resources organize practice and govern individual actions by making certain kinds of conduct possible while precluding others, while not dictating to actors what to do.” (Nicolini, 2013, 47). However, it is important to understand how project managers use this space for discretion in managing their projects, because a misunderstanding of or a negative attitude to norms could jeopardize strategic objectives of the business. Conversely, a positive appropriation can foster project managers’ efficacy. Thus, an insight into how norms are actually used is necessary, which would take into consideration both the normative aspect of rules and also how PM formalized practices can help
project managers in their day-to-day work. If norms are to be apprehended both as a constraint and as an enabler, an appropriation approach appears to be promising.

The concept of appropriation has been widely used in socio-cultural studies of learning processes. The objective was to understand how children or adults become involved in using a cultural tool, like a language or a procedure, and in making it their own. Appropriation is not using or even mastering a new tool, but it is a process of change through user involvement. Rogoff (1995) argues that appropriation goes beyond the notion of internalization, where knowledge would be imported from outside and adapted to the user: appropriation occurs “in the process of participation, as the individual changes through involvement in the situation at hand”. Our purpose is to understand how project managers are dealing with surrounding norms, which can be considered as cultural tools. Using the concept of appropriation in the sense proposed by the socio-cultural theory means that we must observe how project managers have adapted both their behavior and the application of PM norms when they are carrying out a project. In the I.S. field, the concept of appropriation has been widely used for two decades, and it has provided a deeper understanding of the active role of users in I.S. implementations (Poole&DeSanctis, 1989; Orlikowski, 1992). We have drawn on DeSanctis&Poole (1994)’ AST ( Adaptive Structuration Theory), because these structurationist authors offer an operational tool to study appropriation in users’ practices. We have adapted their tool to explore how PM norms are appropriated by project managers in I.T. projects.

Therefore, our research questions are: How do I.T. project managers appropriate PM norms in practice? Are there similarities and/or differences in the way the appropriation is performed?

The present paper will attempt to bring an answer to these questions, based on an empirical exploratory study. In the next section, we explain how the two main concepts (norms and appropriation) and the four aspects of the appropriation construct incorporated in AST (appropriation moves, faithfulness of appropriation, attitude towards appropriation, and instrumental uses) have been adapted for the case of I.T. PM norms. The section following describes the research methodology. The results are then laid out and discussed.

2 Theoretical approach

2.1 What are PM norms?

Standards, methodology, and norms are intertwined terms, which are sometimes interchangeable. In order to provide useful distinctions for our research, we shall start with three examples of well-known documents in the PM area. First, the PMBOK Guide (PMI, 2008) is presented as “a recognized standard for the PM profession”, that is a body of knowledge formalized from “recognized good practices” by practitioners. The authors define a standard as “a formal document that describes established norms, methods, processes and practices”, and the PMBOK Guide has received the ANSI label. It describes a set of generic processes, including recommendations, mention of tools and techniques, and illustrations to better depict certain tools or techniques. Second, PRINCE2 is defined on its official site as “a de facto standard” but also as “a process-based method for effective PM”. It includes several document templates to be used on a particular project. Third, the IPMA Competence Baseline is defined as a “fundamental standard” to be referred to when performing IPMA certification, along with ISO 9001 2000 (IPMA, 2006). It describes in general terms the technical, behavioral and contextual competences expected from project managers to be considered professional by the community.

Standards in PM area are public and external to any particular organization; the aim is disseminating an ideal behavior project managers should conform to. Process oriented standards usually give a set of process requirements, without detailing how to perform an activity. Some techniques have reached the status of a standard in the sense that they are generally recognized as good practices and they are formally described in texts or books (e.g. Gantt chart, precedence diagramming method or earned value technique). Similarly, some type of action (e.g. when starting a project or communicating with
stakeholders) have also acquired the status of standard or “institutionalized practices” as Mignerat & Rivard (2012) call them, i.e. “practices that have come to be considered appropriate – legitimate – in a given context and have acquired the status of norms or have almost become rules in thought and social action”.

In order to provide project managers with additional guidelines or to reach a more uniform form of behavior, an organization can describe precise processes or techniques and document templates to be used by project managers. The outcome can be called a PM method (or methodology) or a PM handbook. The formulation of such an internal document can be inspired or informed by one or several standards.

Standards and methods are to be clearly distinguished from practice. Similarly, the gap between what was prescribed and what is actually done has been a central topic in the studies of acceptance and use of technology (e.g. Orlikowski, 2000). In a given context, internal rules, guidelines or processes are supposed to be used by project managers, but they are not mapped directly into practice. “Practice is the actual unfolding of work over time within the organization as it is performed by individuals and by collectives of individuals” (Müller & Nielsen & Nørbjerg, 2008). At the project level, rules and process descriptions are to be interpreted, and they can be adapted or ignored by project managers for different reasons. Control is partially assumed through reporting procedures.

For this research, we call “PM norms” the set of standards and methods that are highly valued professionally within the PM community. Different meanings are associated with norms, and no common definition can be found in literature from different fields. In particular, there is a debate about whether this concept refers to what is done or to what one should do (Interis, 2011). The term usually refers to social or personal behavior, and four elements can generally be found when the term is used: 1) a norm is a rule, formal or informal on how to behave; 2) it is prevalent within a group (culture, community, family etc.); 3) it reflects core values shared within the reference group (what is good and what is not); 4) non-compliance involves sanctions (moral, social or legal). Based on this very broad scope of the concept, PM norms refer to all the processes (generic or detailed), techniques, behavior etc. surrounding any project manager, whether a beginner or an expert, in the sense that they are widely known and their usage is considered good professional behavior. Sanctions can be internal (from hierarchy), external (lack of recognition from the community) or even come from oneself (feeling of incompetence).

The aim of this research is to investigate how project managers appropriate PM norms.

2.2 The concept of appropriation

In the field of I.S., the concept of appropriation was a major contribution from DeSanctis & Poole to the study of I.S. implementation and use. They define appropriation of the technology as “the immediate, visible actions that evidence deeper structuration processes” (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). It was a core part of their Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST), in which they developed a construct of appropriation. It is a useful lens for researchers who investigate the appropriation phenomenon through analyzing users’ discourse. The construct includes four aspects that are sources of variation in the ways people appropriate a technology. First, appropriation moves are the different ways by which people choose to appropriate a particular feature. Second, users can appropriate a feature with a varying degree of faithfulness to the intents of designers. Third, users can appropriate the features for different instrumental uses, which are linked to personal objectives. Fourth, users can have different attitudes towards appropriation, which may be more or less positive.

Although AST has been developed in the context of a group support system, it has also been used to study information systems other than GDSS (e.g. ERP: Lerouge & Webb, 2004) as well as individual appropriation (e.g. Arbin, 2008). It has even been used as a meta-theory for understanding and integrating existing literature and theories explaining the outcomes of I.T. usage
In this research, we have adapted the appropriation construct developed by DeSanctis & Poole for studying the appropriation of PM norms.

### 2.3 AST and the appropriation of I.T. PM norms

The four aspects of AST appropriation concept have to be adapted to fit the appropriation of I.T. PM norms: appropriation moves, faithfulness, attitude, and instrumental uses.

#### Appropriation moves

When managing a project, managers can make different uses of norms, which reflect different types of appropriation. Building on AST appropriation moves, we have identified four general moves related to the appropriation of PM norms. A project manager may choose to: a) make direct use of the norms, even partially; b) relate the norms to other practices (such as knowledge from previous experiences); c) constrain team members by invoking norms; d) make judgments about the norms (such as usefulness or bureaucracy). Considering the way project managers can use PM norms, we have defined types of appropriation moves that make sense in PM activities (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appropriation moves</th>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To make direct use</td>
<td>Explicit direct appropriation</td>
<td>Project manager makes explicit reference to PM norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implicit direct appropriation</td>
<td>Project manager mentions normalized practices without referring to any PM norm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To relate norms to</td>
<td>Consistent enlargement</td>
<td>Project manager has introduced a practice that is consistent with norms to fit a particular context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other practices</td>
<td>Paradoxical enlargement</td>
<td>Project manager has introduced a practice that is not consistent with PM norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Adaptation moves)</td>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>Project manager has developed a personal practice instead of using a normalized one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enforce the use</td>
<td>Informing</td>
<td>Project manager gives recommendations to team members to comply with PM norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of norms</td>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>Project manager monitors team members for compliance with PM rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make judgment on</td>
<td>Negation</td>
<td>Project manager rejects or ignores PM norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>norms</td>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td>Project manager expresses ambiguity or doubts about PM norms.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>Project manager claims that PM norms are useful for managing a project.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1. AST appropriation moves adapted to explore appropriation of PM norms (adapted from DeSanctis and Poole, 1994)

#### Faithfulness

Appropriations are faithful when they are aligned with the technology’s “spirit” and “structural features”. A lot of criticism has been leveled against these concepts (Jones & Karsten, 2008), and a reconceptualization of an IT artifact has been proposed by Markus & Silver (2008). As for PM norms, the institutionalization of the field of PM and the formalization of professional good practices have built a convergent view of PM. It can be summarized with two extracts from the reference guides of two major PM professional associations. From a process point of view, the PMBOK Guide supports the general principle of a planning-monitoring-controlling loop that should guide the management of every project.

IPMA Competence Baseline, project manager competence is synthesized with an eye symbol: « The eye of competence represents the integration of all the elements of PM as seen through the eyes of the
project manager when evaluating a specific situation. The eye also represents clarity and vision. After processing the information received, the competent and responsible professional in PM takes appropriate action. » (p.7).

Thus, it can be assumed that the general spirit of what is expected by PM norms from a professional project manager is an ability to apply clear and extended knowledge, and behavior that involves planning-controlling.

• Attitudes

We rely on Ajzen&Fishbein (1977)’s widely accepted definition: “Although many definitions of attitude have been proposed, most investigators would agree that a person's attitude represents his evaluation of the entity in question”. Attitudes reflect the project manager’s opinion towards PM norms: positive or negative assessment, uncertainty regarding the value of norms etc. Project managers can feel more or less comfortable when dealing with norms, and more or less willing to improve their PM skills.

• Instrumental uses

DeSanctis&Poole (1994) defined instrumental uses as “the intended purposes, or meaning, that groups assign to technology as they use it”. For example, purposes can be to better perform one’s activities or to maintain social relationships among members with the GSS system. As for PM, project managers’ objectives in using norms can be efficiency (to improve the probability of a project’s success), or career oriented (to be recognized as a good professional) or conformity (if the team is assessed on compliance with organizational rules).

3 Research design

In order to investigate how project managers appropriate PM norms in practice, we conducted an interpretive field study (Klein and Myers, 1999). Similarities and/or differences in the way the appropriation is performed were apprehended through three case studies.

Our unit of analysis was the project team. To control organizational differences and project contexts, the cases were selected from within a single consulting company, and the three projects were part of the same program. The program was under a fixed-price contract, it involved about 100 people, and it was divided into several projects. The goal was to transform a health management software package to fit a large insurance company. Teams were medium-sized (about 10 members) and multi-generational (from 25 to 64). Project managers were young (i.e. less than 35 years old). Oliver, 28, and Xavier, 34, were in charge of a development project. Lawrence, 34, managed a parameterization project. All of them received PM training during their academic and professional career, however they were not engaged in any certification program.

Data were collected in autumn 2010 for a research project funded by the CIGREF Foundation, and served as a basis for the present research. We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews, focusing on PM practices. We interviewed the three project managers and several members of their team (between 3 and 7 persons) in order to control collected data, according to the data triangulation principle. Each interview lasted between an hour to an hour and a half. Two interview guides were prepared, one for project managers and the other for the team members. Both included open questions about different aspects of PM: goal, scope, staffing, planning, monitoring of project progress, communication, information sharing, team members assessment, PM tools and techniques used.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Then the data were coded in two steps, using Nvivo9. The first step was an open, descriptive coding, based on the different themes addressed during the interviews. The second one was a conceptual coding based on the four dimensions of appropriation, as defined by DeSanctis and Poole (1994) : appropriation moves, faithfulness, attitudes and instrumental uses. During the analysis, we looked for convergence and similarities, and we also
considered singularities in the practices of the three project managers. Some moves of appropriation identified by AST’s authors seemed irrelevant and have been removed. Some moves emerging from data have been added.

We gave a presentation of the findings to the interviewees in order to assess the relevance of our analysis. The interviewees confirmed that the research results provide a consistent and meaningful interpretation of their PM practices with regard to norms.

4 Findings

Not surprisingly, several commonalities between the three project managers’ personal use of PM norms have been identified. Indeed, they were submitted to the same normalized environment. We have observed direct appropriation moves from each of them, as well as faithfulness to the spirit of PM norms. However, a thorough analysis of practices reveals that each of them performed different adaptation moves: they use PM norms with different purposes, and they display different attitudes towards norms. These differences result in three different styles of PM: Oliver is oriented towards professionalism; Xavier tries to develop knowledge acquisition and sharing within team members; and Lawrence favors immediate reactions to any unexpected event.

4.1 Direct appropriation moves

The direct appropriation of PM norms by project managers is mainly implicit. It can be detected through their use of some standard PM vocabulary, their reference to "professional" behavior and their vision of the project manager’s role. Indeed, they have adopted terms from the PM body of knowledge, implicitly assuming they are part of the interviewers’ language. For example: “It is a real project with deadlines, constraints, requirements...” (Lawrence). Team members are considered “professional” when they meet their deadlines, especially if they have to work extra hours: “She came early and she worked late in the evening to find a solution. I told her that she was a real professional” (Oliver). Our three project managers share the same vision of their role as project manager: planning project work and monitoring the team’s work progress:

“...[planning and controlling activities]...” (Xavier);

“She came early and she worked late in the evening to find a solution. I told her that she was a real professional” (Oliver);

“...[planning and controlling activities]...” (Lawrence).

Sometimes, the project managers refer to their own practices – mostly planning and controlling – as standard. For example: “For each work package that I receive, I make my estimates, I update my schedule considering human resource availability. I change it every two or three days, because it changes all the time. It is the classic way.” (Xavier); ”Filling a progress report every week, that’s the standard way” (Lawrence); « When it comes to PM or team management, it’s hard to be creative” (Oliver).

4.2 Faithfulness to the spirit of PM norms

From the analysis of direct appropriation moves, it can be assumed that project managers consider the standard planning-monitoring-controlling loop as unquestionable, good practice. Concerning PM knowledge, they all value standard practices: “I joined this company to really focus on this PM job. I hope I will learn a lot here. I do expect I will attend internal training in order to validate my hands-on experience.” (Xavier); “As for tools, I think further progress should be made in our company, compared to Capgemini or Accenture. These companies come with really standardized things.” (Lawrence); “I was trained in my former company. I will attend a training session before the end of the year. They are proven PM methodologies.” (Oliver).

When project managers make adaptation moves, as we will see (4.3), they rarely contradict the normative framework. Neither the project managers nor their teams have mentioned any attempt to
escape from the pressure of PM norms through various strategies (resistance, passivity, non-compliance etc.). Globally, the appropriation moves turned out to be faithful to the spirit of the standards.

However, the three project managers feel that they do have some flexibility: “I have a management system of my own.” (Xavier); “It is a method of my own.” (Lawrence); “No methodology is prescribed. There are things I am expected to do: reporting, performance... Then it is up to me how I achieve my objectives; (...) PM is up to me. (...) As long as they meet performance objectives, project managers can manage things their own way " (Oliver).

4.3 Adaptation moves, attitudes and instrumental uses: three styles of appropriation of PM norms

Although the three project managers display similar behavior, each one has developed a personal style closely linked to the way they appropriate PM norms. Differences relate by and large to human resource management and communication management: most adaptation moves have been observed in those two areas. Project managers all remain faithful to the spirit of the norms. However their attitudes towards PM norms are not uniform. Even if professional legitimacy and project performance are mentioned by all as a reason for using PM norms, instrumental uses have been observed for each project manager.

4.3.1 Oliver: a committed conformist

For Oliver, being a project manager is a fully-fledged profession, with institutionalized practices. He is highly concerned with PM standards, because compliance leads to professional recognition: “PM has been formalized for hundreds of years. There is one best practice, and project managers usually stick to it. I try to follow PMI’s recommendations because I intend to be PMP1 certified one day”. In addition, he is highly involved in social networking with other project managers. On the other hand, although an engineer, he does not get personally involved with the project scope.

In his view, a project manager should keep his distance from team members: “I usually don’t have lunch with them. Hierarchy is not that strong, but I prefer to keep a separation. It makes it easier to deal with problems if we are not friends”. He mainly adopts a monitoring and controlling position. He wants them to behave like “professionals”, i.e. to be fully committed to performance. Industrialization within PM should be developed, in order to reduce the impact of variation in developers’ skills: « on a highly industrialized project such as ours, the goal is to reduce developers’ autonomy and level individual differences ». Work allocation between team members is strictly defined, allowing all of them to be highly autonomous. However, we noted some consistent enlargement moves. The program rule is that team members should enter progress data everyday: “but, it’s usually at the end of every week”. Project managers are supposed to have a weekly meeting with the team, but: “when I have nothing to say, I don’t have it”.

4.3.2 Xavier: a pragmatic leader

Xavier has adopted a practical view of PM norms. They can be useful, but he stresses the importance of experience over theory: “I do not conform to PM dogma. I mainly do my job from my experience”. Sometimes, he does not comply with the program’s rules, but he argues that it is to achieve a higher objective: “For example, let’s say the client sends specs beyond the due date, I should refuse to stick to my initial delivery commitment. But that’s not positive. So in this case I have to waive the fixed price rule, which is four months between specs and deliverables”. He complains that standard tools are not

1 The PMP acronym (Project Management Professional) refers to a PMI certification.
always the best: “In our company, the trend is towards standardized tools, but scheduling tools can be different from one project to another. We have developed an Access tool to manage our follow-up”.

Xavier is aware that acquiring knowledge of PM norms would be good for his own career advancement but he is also concerned with the importance of the project for the future of their jobs: “Our development site could be jeopardized if the project fails”.

Besides, he recognizes the importance of normalized processes for large projects. However, for him a team member “is not a resource”, he sees himself as an “emotional” project manager and he has a “friendly” relationship with the team. Xavier manages his project according to the knowledge creating company model (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Collaboration is highly valued, and problems are often submitted to team members for the group to solve: “We often discuss things, especially if they are with complex specifications. Sometimes we set up a dedicated workshop”. The team is organized as a network where knowledge is shared. Xavier coordinates this network as if he were a team captain. He is concerned with each team member’s development, but also with team building.

4.3.3 Lawrence: a skeptical utilitarian

Lawrence’s relationship with PM norms is ambiguous. He may endorse PM norms: “It is important (...) perhaps especially if there is an audit”, but he is also highly critical of many normalized practices. In his view, there is conflict between “paperwork” and efficiency: “We have what we call a QMS, risk reporting methodology, schedules reporting and so on (...) Paperwork is a never-ending activity... when we add that to the time spent in program meetings, there’s no time left... I hate paperwork”.

He does not mention any upcoming training programs. He feels that PM norms should be used if they advance the project: “On-time deliverables are my main concern”. Lawrence has adopted a real-time monitoring of his project. Knowledge sharing is organized to improve team responsiveness.

In addition, we observed three appropriation moves: two consistent enlargement moves and one paradoxical enlargement move. Firstly, Lawrence always reports to the program manager, but he is usually late and he argues that he had a higher priority task. For this reason, he has developed a scheduling software: «the software tool used on the program is budget oriented. I needed a comprehensive view to track my project’s progress. I created an excel spreadsheet, and I called it the ToDo list». Finally, he combines very accurate weekly scheduling practice with immediacy management. This appears paradoxical as detailed scheduling should ensure stability during the upcoming week. Instead, when an unplanned event occurs, he immediately interferes with team members’ planned activities to update the schedule. He favors a direct style when communicating with team members: “I look them in the eye and tell them what’s to be done, and after that, possibly send a confirmation email”.

5 Discussion

We have studied three project managers with similar projects in the same context, under the same PM normative pressure. All three projects were successfully managed. Firstly, we observed a general appropriation of the core of PM norms: the planning-controlling loop is fully internalized, as well as the project manager’s key role. All informants referred to normalized PM practices, whether formal or informal. The scope of the norms that were mentioned could be the program in which projects were included (e.g. quality system), the company they were working for (e.g. types of indicators), or more widely, the PM profession (e.g. some vocabulary). No one rejected or ignored PM norms, even the project manager who is skeptical about the effectiveness of all the reports he has to send to the program manager has developed a tool for more accurate monitoring. All three proved to be faithful to the spirit of the norms. However, all of them have constructed personal meanings of what they define as a good project manager. This confirms the interest of using an appropriation approach to studying PM practices.
Indeed, we observed three different attitudes towards PM norms, with specific expectations. Agency appears to be a major issue in the appropriation process: the three project managers place great importance on their personal options. They mostly differ in the way they manage team members and communicate with them. Thus, three different profiles of a PM manager have emerged. However, these profiles cannot be considered as ideal types. They mainly bring evidence that PM norms can be appropriated in very different ways. Oliver, the ‘committed conformist’, does not question legitimacy of the norms. For him, they clearly contribute to the success of the project, and beyond that, being qualified is the gateway towards professionalism and legitimacy. In his view, a professional project manager should not be close to team members. For Xavier, the ‘pragmatic leader’, experience and expertise prevail. Project managers should be supportive and friendly with team members, and should be concerned with enhancing their skills. However, using PM norms is useful to be recognized. Lawrence, the ‘skeptical utilitarian’, is the only one who stresses the pressure of PM norms. For him, certain normalized practices can be questioned because they can affect project performance, namely on-time delivery. He is close to the team, especially to enhance the project time performance.

Besides the appropriation of PM norms, an implicit trend towards agility has been observed in all three projects. However, none of our informants mentioned any agile methodology. Nevertheless, some characteristics were closer to agile principles than to the classical project organization: face-to-face interactions, strong leadership and reactive management. First, face-to-face interactions are important in all three projects, even the project managed by Oliver. This mode of interaction is highly valued by all the team members. We also noticed strong leadership, mainly transformational leadership. The three project managers felt they were playing a key role in the team’s motivation and commitment. Finally, monitoring and controlling was very reactive in the three projects. Schedules were fraught with uncertainties because unplanned demands could arrive at anytime, especially feedback from quality control. Reactivity was extreme in Lawrence’s management, but the two others were also highly responsive to changes.

6 Conclusion

The objective of this research was to understand how IT project managers appropriate PM norms. We have built on AST, and we have adapted its core constructs to study the appropriation of PM norms: appropriation moves, faithfulness, attitude, and instrumental uses. We conducted a study on three projects within the same program, led by a single company. Several empirical results have been found. First, our analysis confirms that some PM practices are institutionalized and have acquired the status of norms (Mignerat&Rivard, 2010). This common knowledge is considered beneficial for a project’s performance, and using this knowledge can bring professional recognition. Second, appropriation moves were found to be mostly implicit. The planning-monitoring-controlling loop is widely internalized. However, customizing one’s management style is very important. Project managers argue for a style of their own. They are engaged when adopting PM norms. Adaptation moves are mainly related to human resource and communication management.

As regards social appropriation, the appropriation of PM norms involves both an identity dimension and a collective dimension. On the one hand, using PM norms is a way to enter the professional PM community; on the other hand, when performing adaptation moves, project managers assert their individuality. From our analysis, three different profiles have emerged. Given the limited number of case studies, these results may not be extrapolated to the entire population of project managers, and the three different styles of appropriation of PM norms should not be considered as ideal types. Nevertheless, this research demonstrates that several approaches to integrating and interpreting PM norms can coexist within the same environment.
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