ACCIDENTAL VS INTENTIONAL PROJECT MANAGERS: A CASE STUDY

Tres Bishop
Florida Atlantic University

Project management has increasingly become an important part of business globally. Once referred to as the “accidental profession”, project management has recently made strides to become more professionalized. What results are now available? This project uses the case study research methodology to take an in-depth look into project management at a small to medium-sized enterprise. The case employs an empirically proven framework to compare and contrast accidental and intentional project management attitudes and traditional versus protean career approaches. Based on semi-structured interviews, documented evidence, and direct observation, the project suggests that accidental project management is still prevalent in industry, as are protean career attitudes. Additionally, this study recommends that a greater focus on early project management education may result in increased intentional entry into the profession.

INTRODUCTION

Project management has become an important area of focus in contemporary business. Projects, once seen as an addendum to functional work, have been increasingly integrated into the structure of the business world (Kerzner 2017). Project management offices, or PMO’s, are now commonly found in various businesses such as manufacturing, aerospace and defense, telecommunications, construction, and health care, to name but a few. Since 2000, there has been an explosion in the interest of the project management profession and the skills and traits of the successful project manager (PM) (Chipulu 2013, El-Sabaa 2001, Fisher 2010, Maylor 2001). According to the annual reports from the Project Management Institute (PMI), there has been approximately a 64% increase over the past ten years in PMI membership, indicating that interest in the field is significant and growing (PMI Annual Report 2008, 2022). However, the project management profession is quite new in terms of a legitimate career path. Not often have children been asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and the questioner received the enthusiastic response of “A project manager.” This attitude has made the project management profession derisively called the accidental profession (Darrell 2010). The PM career path has been undefined, with PM roles being thrust unexpectedly upon employees who were neither trained in the principles nor seeking the position (Pinto & Kharbanda, 1995a; Davis, 1971; Darrell, 2010; Patton et al., 2010). Does this type of thinking still persist? What has been done in the past 10 to 15 years to address these issues in the project management profession? In other words, is Project Management still an accidental profession?
There is overwhelming evidence that the career field has become more formalized and widespread in public, private, and academic institutions. However, there is also evidence that many PMs transition into the role in an unplanned fashion from other related disciplines, usually of a technical nature (Hodgson 2011). This project empirically investigated this issue using the case research method. The case site was one small to medium-sized enterprise in the telecommunications industry. Seven project managers were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to understand better how each of them entered the PM profession. The thesis was that a protean career influenced the PM’s entry into the profession. According to Hall (2004), the protean career’s central premise is that the employee is the driving force in career direction rather than the organization, as is usually described in a more traditional career path. In a protean career, the employee’s core values drive career decisions, and the success factors are much more subjective or psychological. This study used audio-recorded interviews and pertinent documentation from participants to assess themes in the PM experience. It was theorized that regardless of how one enters the PM profession, the intrinsic motivation to manage one’s career path is present. The resulting research questions were:

RQ1: How do Project Managers enter the profession?

RQ2: How do the career progressions and motivations compare between accidental versus intentional Project Managers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of project management as an accidental profession is not new since articles making that claim date back to the 1970’s (Davis, 1971). As briefly described in the preceding section, authors have asserted that project management is an accidental profession (Pinto & Kharbanda, 1995a, 1995; Davis, 1971; Darrell, 2010; Paton et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2015; Havermans, 2019). One of the more frequently cited sources was an article by Pinto and Kharbanda (1995a). These authors claimed that two of the primary reasons that project management is considered an accidental profession is that few formal programs exist for the selection and training of PMs. Secondly, there is a lack of a well-defined career path (Pinto & Kharbanda, 1995a). The authors (1995b) further explored this topic in a book of that same year that compared the differences between accidental and intentional PMs. Table 1 shows the main differences between the accidental and intentional PMs based on seven criteria. The data supports the idea that project management remains an accidental profession (Pinto & Kharbanda, 1995b).
TABLE 1
Comparison of Accidental vs Intentional Project Management
Adapted from Pinto & Kharbanda (1995b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Accidental PM</th>
<th>Career (Intentional) PM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Technical: engineering or science</td>
<td>Project area: management, engineering, functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry to PM</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Planned, after training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression Desire</td>
<td>Return to a technical field</td>
<td>Remain in PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Education</td>
<td>Unknown, possibly technical PM</td>
<td>PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of PM</td>
<td>Necessary, a career step, uninvited career move</td>
<td>Interesting, challenging, rewarding, progression to challenging assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Orientation Goals</td>
<td>Specialist, technical recognition</td>
<td>Generalists, managerial advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge or Skills Required</td>
<td>Technical, detailed, in-depth,</td>
<td>General, broad scope, Professional Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>line managers with management experience</td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Richardson (2015) agreed with Pinto and Kharbanda (1995a) after his team conducted interviews with 87 PMs from international and US-based organizations and found that project management remains an accidental profession despite the best efforts of academia, professional associations, and targeted professional development. The data suggested that most PMs do not begin their career in a PM role on day one. It suggested that they transition into PM from another usually technical role (Richardson 2015). Darrell (2010) first advocated this sentiment when he conducted a study of 46 accidental project managers in the Australian public sector and found that the PMs were largely selected as a result of their technical or management expertise rather than specific project management acumen, which often failed to deliver project goals and expectations. Although the academic literature on this topic is relatively sparse, there is significant evidence that a proven or traditional career path for PMs often begins in a technical discipline (Hodgson, 2011; Darrell, 2010; Pinto & Kharbanda, 1995a; Richardson, 2015). However, this is not a guaranteed path to success, as studies suggest that the technical to PM route does not necessarily equip the PM with the requisite skills to be successful. For example, in a survey sent to 126 PMs in Egypt who represented the information technology, utility, and agricultural industries, PMs were asked to rank the most essential project manager skills. Human skills such as communication, enthusiasm, or flexibility were overwhelmingly ranked higher than technical skills (El-Sabaa, 2001). Some authors question if moving from a technical role to a PM is worth the time or effort. Holzle (2010) claimed that PMs often felt they were not adequately recognized or compensated for their efforts. This was mainly due to the role's temporary and part-time nature that ultimately left the PMs focused on career advancement in a more traditional role. Hodgson (2011) studied
sixteen project managers in the United Kingdom over a four-year period. He found PMs were often disillusioned with what they felt was administrative or secretarial work and a lack of status afforded to the PM role. “This was evident even at the most basic level of perceived usefulness of training and qualification in the area of practice” (Hodgson, 2011, p. 6). Worse yet, Zwerman et al. (2004) conducted a study from 2001 to 2003 that investigated the professionalization of project management. The team relied on existing academic literature to discover exactly what defined a profession. They found that a designation as a profession rested on the following:

- The ability of members to capture exclusive use of the name
- Laying claim to exclusive mastery of an esoteric body of knowledge
- Achieving public and governmental recognition
- Setting educational requirements

Based on these factors, the study concluded that although progress has been made, project management does not qualify as a profession and that there was little evidence to support the hope that it would have professional status bestowed upon it (Zwerman 2004).

However, the news is not all bad. As stated previously, project management has garnered significant interest in both the academic and practitioner worlds. Specifically, PMI has experienced momentous growth from nearly 1000 members in 1975 to over 670,000 members as of 2023, including members from over 207 countries and territories worldwide (PMI Annual Report, 2016). Additionally, there seems to be significant growth regarding project-related employment. A study conducted by PMI and the Anderson Economic Group (AEG) estimated that there will be a 33% increase in project-related employment over the ten-year period from 2017-2027 (Anderson, 2017). Despite Zwerman’s (2004) bleak outlook, in December 2016, the project management profession formally achieved public and governmental recognition in the United States (PMI Annual Report, 2016). After President Obama signed the Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act, the new law reformed government policy in four essential ways:

1. Created a formal job series and career path for program managers
2. Developed a standards-based program management policy
3. Recognized the important role of executive sponsorship and engagement by designating a senior executive responsible for program management policy and strategy
4. Shared knowledge of successful approaches to program management through an interagency council

While most of the available data suggests that project management is still largely an accidental profession, a glimmer of hope clearly shows that project management is moving slowly toward professionalization. However, who will be responsible for developing the profession if organizations are sluggish to respond to the emergent project management trend?
Theoretical Foundation

In the past, the traditional view of career development that formed in the 1950’s to 1960’s was that the organization was responsible for developing an employee’s career (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). An employee’s primary career-related goal was to work to climb the corporate ladder, with the measure of success being the highest rung achieved (Hall, 1976). The relationship between the employee and the employer was characterized by the exchange of loyalty between the employee and the firm and the promise of a job from the firm (Rosenbaum, 1979). Since then, there has been debate about other, more flexible options that better meet the needs of today’s workforce (Baruch, 2006). Chief among these new options are the boundary-less, multidirectional, and protean careers, to name a few (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Akkermans, 2020; Lo Presti & Elia, 2020). This examination focuses exclusively on the protean career, where the employee is the driving force and she, not the firm, defines career success (Hall, 2004; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; De Vos & Soens, 2008). Hall’s (1976) framework is used to compare and contrast the career actions of the PMs interviewed and classify their behaviors as either protean or traditional, according to Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Traditional Career</th>
<th>Protean Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Advancement</td>
<td>Freedom, growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success Criteria</td>
<td>Position level, Salary</td>
<td>Psychological success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Attributes</td>
<td>Organizational loyalty</td>
<td>Work satisfaction, professional commitment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

METHODODOLOGY

This examination studied the cases of seven project managers in the contemporary setting of one sponsor organization. Since the cases were bounded by one organization, the data yielded a common case and controlled variation by design. The objective of the single case design for common cases is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation (accidental project managers) with the objective of revealing the social processes of theoretical interest (Yin, 2014). The qualitative case approach is best suited to answer “how” or “why” questions (Yin, 2014; Gill, 2011; Creswell, 2013).
Sponsor Organization

The sponsor organization had over 40 years of experience designing and implementing cutting-edge solutions for the toughest communications challenges in the world. Clients included the U.S. military and customers worldwide. Additionally, the subject firm provided remote communication solutions to the commercial sector, including some of the world’s largest energy companies. The organization was a wholly owned subsidiary of a world leader in digital communication systems. As a provider of advanced communication systems, the company developed alternatives to more expensive satellite communication that could be deployed in harsh environments.

Data Collection

As Yin (2014) pointed out, a major strength of case study research is the use of triangulation of data or multiple sources of data for evidence. As such, the data collection for this project consisted of the following:

- Interviews with project managers
- A review of pertinent documentation, including the following:
  - Program review records
  - Project agendas
  - Project schedules
  - Program Manager job descriptions
  - Project Engineer job descriptions
  - Organization Project Management Office policies
- Direct observation

The semi-structured interviews consisted of 13 open-ended questions asked of seven project managers. The interviews lasted from 11 to 44 minutes. A number identified each PM to ensure their anonymity.

Findings: Accidental vs. Intentional PM Careers

The 13 interview questions were based on Pinto and Kharbanda’s (1995b) seven categories used to differentiate accidental from and career PMs. The categories were education, entry to project management, progression desire, advanced education, view of project management professional orientation goals, and knowledge or skills required.

Education. Of the seven PMs interviewed, six had technical education. These consisted primarily of degrees in engineering. Electrical engineering was the most common, but mechanical engineering and computer science were also represented. Only one, PM7, had received an initial education in management. PM2 had received a minor in management but began his career with a clear engineering focus. All, except PM3, received project management training after becoming
a PM. PM3 received on-the-job training and advice from respected peers and mentors. However, he never received formal project management training.

**Entry to Project Management.** Six of the PMs believed themselves to be accidental PMs. These six were in the midst of following successful technical careers and were “tapped on the shoulder” by executive management and asked to enter the role of PM for various reasons, discussed in more detail later. Only PM7 had intentionally pursued a career in PM. However, all seven professed an early desire for management positions, whether technical or supervisory.

**Progression Desire.** The progression desire of the seven PMs was almost evenly split. Four PMs (PM2, PM4, PM6, PM7) desired to remain in the world of project management. Three (PM1, PM3, PM5) preferred a return to a technical role. PM 3 expressed during the interview that he was ambivalent about the options. However, he recently resigned from his more project-focused role and accepted a dual technical leader/PM position at another company. Because of the recent change, the researcher classified him as returning to a technical role.

**Advanced Education.** Three (PM1, PM3, PM7) of the seven PMs had earned an advanced education. Two (PM1, PM3) had received technical master’s degrees. One in electrical engineering the other in mechanical engineering. PM7 was the only one who had received a master’s in management of any sort. She earned a Master’s in Project Management for the express purpose of progressing in the field. As stated previously, all PMs received some type of training once they progressed into the PM role, whether formal or informal.

**View of Project Management.** The majority of the PM’s (PM2, PM3, PM4, PM7) viewed project management as an interesting and challenging role. They saw it as a rewarding career in and of itself. They described their careers as a progression of increasing responsibility with larger and more varied projects with mainly larger budgets and budgetary concerns with correspondingly larger teams to assist. They found meaning and purpose in what they did. PM4 described it as “being like a Quarterback on a football team.” Conversely, three PMs (PM1, PM5, PM6) had largely negative views of their experience in project management. Generally, they believed project management to be a stepping stone to a more prominent role within their company or industry. In fact, for PM1 and PM6, it was a successful strategy because both had risen to the Vice President ranks, one in engineering and one in operations. Although this outcome was neither desired initially nor planned, project management appeared to be a necessary part of their career outcome. PM1 conveyed that he felt he had become worse during his PM role in a large aerospace and defense company. When pressed for an explanation, he stated that the stress of meeting cost and schedule deadlines caused him to “come down on people” in ways that “were opposed to his natural temperament.” He further offered that “he hadn’t experienced the same level of stress in technical leadership roles.”

**Professional Orientation Goals.** Most of the PMs (PM2, PM4, PM6, PM7) interviewed professed a desire to stay in and grow in project management. However, three PMs (PM1, PM3,
PM5) desired to return to a more technical role. All three wanted a role in technical management up to and including managing technical resources, including people.

**Knowledge or Skills Required.** The knowledge and skills required lined up exactly with the professional orientation goals of the PMs. This finding was not surprising. However, one skill was common to the entire group and is discussed more later. The common skill was self-efficacy, one’s belief in one’s ability to succeed, accomplish tasks, or possess the confidence to take action (Lloyd-Walker 2016).

Table 3 categorizes each PM based on the interview responses, documentation reviews, and observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PM Responses Categorized for Accidental and Intentional PM Careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry to Project Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression Desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Orientation Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge or Skills Required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings: Traditional vs. Protean Career Motivations**

The 13 interview questions also centered on the five categories that compared the traditional and protean career paths defined by Hall (1976). The categories included who was responsible for the career, the values, employee mobility, success criteria, and key attributes.

**Responsibility.** Six (PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6) of the seven PMs emphatically expressed that the employee was responsible for their own career. Only PM7 stated that the organization was responsible for their career. When asked to elaborate, PM7 commented that their supervisor was specifically responsible for their career. PM7 is the only one who expressed the traditional view in this category.

**Values and Success Criteria.** The values and success criteria sections yielded interesting results. As defined by Hall (1976), an employee can have either a traditional career view on values or a protean career view. The line of demarcation was that the employee was primarily concerned with advancement (traditional) or freedom and growth (protean). Similarly, the values of an employee helped guide the success criteria. The criteria were defined as salary or position level (traditional) and psychological success (protean). Curiously, the PMs interviewed expressed views that would classify them as members of both groups. Specifically, all of the PMs conveyed
sentiments that would organize them in the traditional category for their early career when their focus was on advancement and economic security. Next, they indicated they would seek positions that would securely lock them in the protean camp for their mid to late career. For example, PM3 communicated that one of the primary reasons he chose to major in a technical field (mechanical engineering) and then transition to project management was for the monetary rewards such a career path offered. However, once a certain level of financial security was achieved, the driving force in going to work each morning was the “fun” inherent in the job. In the example, he stated, “What can be more fun than getting up each morning and blowing things up?” All PMs expressed similar stories. PMs 2 and 4 stated that salary, the associated positional level involved, and advancement (climbing the corporate ladder) were directly tied to the need to provide “a good life” for a growing family. Once the good-life was accomplished, the goal shifted (mid to late career) and was more about accomplishing something meaningful with their lives, such as specifically exemplifying “leadership” (PM2) and getting the job done for the customer (PM4). No other observations suggested advancement was the primary goal or motivator in a mid to late career.

**Mobility.** In line with the protean attitude, mobility was common to the PMs. There were no life-long PM employees in the sponsor organization. All PMs were recruited from outside the organization. The mobility spectrum ranged from a high of experience in seven organizations to a low of two, with an average of five.

**Key Attributes.** All PMs mentioned that the key attribute for their careers was related to work satisfaction. PM2 commented, “If you are not excited about going to work every day, it would be wise to find something else to do.” PM1 agreed and stated how much he enjoyed “solving complex technical problems” for his customers. There were no PMs in this study who claimed that organizational loyalty was in any way an essential attribute for a career in project management.

**TABLE 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Traditional Career</th>
<th>Protean Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>PM7</td>
<td>PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Early Career PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6 PM7</td>
<td>Mid-Late Career PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>PM5 PM7</td>
<td>PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success Criteria</td>
<td>Early Career PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6 PM7</td>
<td>Late Career PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Attributes</td>
<td>PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6 PM7</td>
<td>PM1 PM2 PM3 PM4 PM5 PM6 PM7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 categorizes each PM’s perspectives on responsibility, values, mobility, success criteria, and key attributes related to work satisfaction. Classification decisions were based on the results of the interviews, the review of documentation, and direct observation. Documentation
review included the organization’s PM policies and procedures, project review records, job descriptions, and project schedules.

**DISCUSSION**

This study sought to determine (a) how Project Managers enter the profession and (b) differences between the career progression and motivations of accidental versus intentional Project Managers. The results show that more PM data were categorized as accidental than intentional. In total, there were 26 data points assigned to accidental and 19 to intentional. Though not quantitatively assessed for statistical significance, these results align with the literature suggesting that project management career pathways are still largely accidental. The largest differences between the two groups were education and entry to project management categories. All but a single PM was trained in a technical discipline and entered the profession from another field rather than intentionally planning to enter project management. This result is similar Paton’s (2010) study conducted in the United Kingdom. A major challenge remains entry into the project management field, just as Pinto and Kharbanda (1995a) forecast. All PMs expressed that some technical knowledge would be valuable to a PM regardless of industry. Although some (PM1, PM5, PM7) believed that one could transition into a PM role without necessarily having a technical background, the majority believed that PM-related skills (general management) could be learned on the job. This view implies that PMs do not necessarily need a degree in project management. The majority of PMs felt influenced to adopt their role because the requisite skills can be learned in a course or a certificate program, such as PMP (*Project Management Professional*). Two of the PMs (PM2, PM4) had been PMP certified. PM 7 planned on getting certification but was unsure whether it would add much value to their Master’s in Project Management.

The primary skill set needed to enter the PM field was industry experience. This finding is consistent with Chipulu’s (2013) study. All PMs believed that industry experience would be helpful. PM2 believed industry experience was absolutely necessary for PMs in the communications field. He commented that the experience in a particular industry would free the PM to focus on “big picture tasks” instead of focusing on the details of a specific industry. This result was validated in the organizational job descriptions for Program Manager, Program Manager 2, and Project Engineer. The subject organization required their PMs to have 5 to 15 years of experience in the communications industry. The only exception to this prerequisite was the description for the Deputy Program Manager, which did not specify experience requirements. Deputy Program Manager roles were created for current employees with the requirements written to match an individual’s background. In practice, Deputy Program Managers had communications industry experience prior to their initial hire.

There were some unanticipated findings in the categories of progression desire, project management view, professional orientation goals, and knowledge or skills required. The results generally reveal an almost even split between the accidental and intentional PMs, with some slightly leaning toward the intentional PM. A notable difference suggests that accidental PM attitudes were more prevalent during a PM’s early career, and intentional PM attitudes dominated
the mid to late careers of the group interviewed. This outcome is predictable if we expect PMs to take a calculated approach at mid-career. Self-efficacy predicts deliberate methods as characteristic of the project management profession (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016) and was apparent in the group studied. Supporting statements included a desire “to take the bull by the horns” (PM4), “I’ve always believed in my abilities” (PM2), or “I enjoy jumping in and getting my hands dirty” (PM6). The subject organization’s documentation also confirms this view in project management plans with statements like “The project manager was the final authority on all project matters” and “The PM is responsible for the successful implementation and execution of the project.” Finally, direct observation of company activities also verified this finding. The organization’s president made clear his expectation that the PM, and the PM alone, is responsible for all their program activities.

Hall’s (1976) framework was used to compare traditional and protean career attitudes. The findings suggest that the PMs studied leaned heavily towards the protean attitudes. Specifically, protean attitudes were evident in responsibility, mobility, and key attributes. Protean responses outnumbered traditional nearly 2 to 1. For example, all but one PM (PM7) believed that the individual employee was responsible for their own career, which is central to the protean theory (Briscoe, 2006). Five of the seven PMs experienced high levels of career mobility (PM1, PM2, PM3, PM4, PM6). Collectively, they expressed a desire “to find the best opportunity” and pursue other opportunities as they arose when growth and satisfaction accompanied the opportunity. Two other PMs moved less. One (PM5) had satisfying opportunities within the same large organization with low risk. He only transitioned to another company when he had a strong desire to work in a smaller organization without the added bureaucracy commonly found in larger organizations (Ghobadian 1996). PM7 moved to a different geographic location to support a spouse rather than pursue a growth opportunity. In terms of key attributes, all PMs were securely aligned with the protean view of work satisfaction and a commitment to the profession. While organizational loyalty was not a salient issue for the PMs interviewed, all PMs expressed their concern for “doing right by the organization” or “protecting the brand,” which might be surrogates for loyalty.

The same early and mid-to-late career finding from the application of the Pinto and Kharbanda (1995b) model appeared in the use of Hall’s (1976) model for the values and success criteria. The data indicate that advancement, progression success, and increased salary were primary goals early in one's career. After achieving a career foundation, psychological success from meaningful and happy becomes important. PM2 stated, "A career in project management is more of an evolution than an accidental or a planned event.” While Table 4 shows that the protean career attitude is evident at nearly a two-to-one ratio, traditional career attitudes and behaviors still exist. This view is also supported in the related literature (McDonald 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

The results show that most of the PMs studied entered the profession in an accidental or unplanned manner, consistent with the academic literature. Only one PM in the study planned on project management early in their career. The PMs tended toward accidental project management
early in their careers and intentional project management in their mid-to-late career. As expected, protean career attitudes were widespread among the PMs for career responsibility, career mobility, and key career attributes. Most of the PMs discovered project management and the PM role after receiving initial training in a different technical field.

The career motivations and actions of accidental and intentional PMs depended mainly on the individual’s progression desire. When the PM sought to stay and grow, they were more likely to view project management favorably and seek more managerial training to further their development. If the PM wanted to transition back to a technical role, they generally held negative or ambivalent views of project management. In turn, they sought specialized technical training to progress in technical fields.

The principal contribution of this investigation was the confirmation that project management is still largely an accidental career path for most practitioners. The present study posits that the prevalence of accidental project management persists within the industry, accompanied by the persistence of protean career attitudes. Moreover, this study advocates for a heightened emphasis on early career project management education, proposing that such an approach may yield enhanced deliberate engagement with the profession.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on one organization and seven project managers, so the results cannot be fully generalized to broader populations. Multiple industries, organizations within those industries, and various types of PMs within those organizations are needed to achieve effective generalizations. The qualitative approach relied on the investigator's interpretations, potentially impacting the findings' reliability and validity. Nevertheless, the approach taken here offers additional insight and more groundwork for further research.

Education and entry into project management were the major findings that created an opportunity for future research. While the amount of education and certification programs continue to grow, it does not appear that they have had the desired effect for at least the subject organization and the seven PMs who primarily identified as accidental project managers. There is room to examine whether the project management profession can reach potential practitioners earlier in their educational process and determine if that would impact the number of intentional PMs. Research is also needed to determine the differences in the PM practices of small-to-medium-sized enterprises versus larger organizations. The literature in those areas remains scant (Turner, 2009). Finally, larger and more representative samples would allow the quantitative analysis to show reliability and validity.
REFERENCES


Dr. Tres Bishop is currently an Operations Management and Data Analytics faculty member in the College of Business at Florida Atlantic University. He is also the Managing Partner at Tres Bishop Consulting, serving as an advisor and trainer to individuals, teams, and organizations. Dr. Bishop earned a BS in Industrial Engineering from the University of Florida, an MS in Engineering Management and MBA from the Florida Institute of Technology, and a Doctorate of Business (DBA) from the University of South Florida. His research and teaching interests are Continuous Improvement, Quality Management, Operations and Supply Chain Management, Project Management and Data Analytics. He has earned five professional certifications, including a Master Black Belt in Lean Six Sigma, Project Management Professional and Certified Manager of Quality. Prior to Academia, Dr. Bishop spent 20 years working as a leader in the aerospace/defense and healthcare industries.