

## ***Managing and Working in Project Society*<sup>1</sup>**

### **On the Road to Project Society - A Swedish Story**

**Torbjörn Wenell, Eskil Ekstedt and Rolf A. Lundin**

In the book "Managing and Working in Project Society" (Lundin et al, 2015) there is a discussion about challenges in the transformation from the dominance of traditional industrial organizations to an extensive use of project organizations, especially challenges related to management and work. The senior author of this article, Torbjörn Wenell, has been involved in the development of major projects and project thinking since the 60`s, a period covering most of the ongoing transformation so far in Sweden. In the following we will provide some illustrations to the "projectification" process in this country essentially building on his experiences starting in the 60`s with how international industrial companies in Sweden (like Volvo, Saab and Ericsson) developed and increasingly became supported by advanced projects to the present time when we have seen a diffusion of projects and project thinking to all parts of society of today.

In the previously mentioned book on "Project Society" the following three archetypes are used to characterize "projectification" and the resulting projects in different environments: 1) Project based organizations (PBOs) deliver projects directly to their customers as their business, 2) Project-supported organizations or PSOs refers to organizations making use of projects in the traditional, internal functioning and of the development of their organization. 3) Project networks or PNWs, refers to the proliferation of inter-organizational (and interpersonal) projects in various contexts. These kinds of projects are not only numerous but they are also becoming increasingly sophisticated. To meet the increasing demand of knowledge on how to handle management and work in projects, models have been developed, educational programs have been started and professional organizations for project managers have been founded.

The three archetypes are useful when it comes to describe the development as seen in the trajectory of the experiences by Wenell. In the early 60`s he was working with planning different projects within Saab and Ericsson. In this PSO environment the projects were related to engineering and covered computer and electronics development as well as military equipment. The activity also emphasized rational ways of project planning *per se*. When realizing that models and computer support not by itself gives successful projects he started

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<sup>1</sup>This series of articles from members of the Swedish Project Academy is based on the theme and concepts in the book [Managing and Working in Project Society](#) by Rolf A. Lundin, Niklas Arvidsson, Tim Brady, Eskil Ekstedt, Christophe Midler and Jorg Sydow, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015. The book won the PMI David I. Cleland Project Management Literature Award in 2016.

to stress integration and communication methods for projects. Leadership, teambuilding and coaching became important ingredients.

The early experiences of the planning for success in the industrial context were developed and extended into project consultancy work of a PBO type and into competence programs for practical project work and project management. Towards the end of the 60's an association for practicing project managers was formed, "Projektforum", initiated by Wenell. At approximately the same time the first international symposium in project management took place in Europe. The organizer was called "Internet" (standing for international network) which has now changed the name into IPMA (International Project Management Association), playing a similar role in Europe as PMI (Project Management Institute) in the US.

Towards the end of the 60's Wenell started his own consultancy firm. Initially the company focused on the extensive demand for education, especially on how to manage projects. The design of practical models contributed to the "projectification" of many organizations. The company also took part in the start-up of major project in for example Volvo and Saab in the transportation sector and in the pharmaceutical producer (Astra) and its development of Losec in the health care sector. Today the company is heavily engaged in the development of sustainable project strategies in global Swedish industrial groups.

The 70's involved refinements of the experiences gained from the engagement in development projects and from spreading the word of the usefulness of project work. Project competence became an expression characterizing the direction of the developments connected to industrial work. Participation in practical projects and in consultancy played an important role during the first decades after establishing the area. The usefulness of attending to consultancy in the project area was demonstrated by the growth of the consultancy sector in general and as well reflected in the way the Wenell company grew.

The notion of the competence of companies to run development projects was also related to the 70's and later. The word "projektivitet" was introduced by Wenell in 1981 as a Swedish term for the capability of business organizations to use project organizing to reach its business and social goals. Project models for control purposes were also developed in the same vein. A broader awareness and stress on the crucial role of projects for development became evident towards the end of the previous century.

The use of project networks (PNWs) in development and research activities within project intensive industries, not least those related to the expansion of IT and biotechnology became more and more common. Those industries are often part of clusters like the industrial district of Kista (in the outskirts of Stockholm), where private companies like Ericsson and IBM, universities like the Royal Institute of Technology as well as local authorities take part. An example of a project in a PNW environment is the development of the lunar satellite Smart 1 where the space industries of the European countries took part and the Swedish project management team worked closely together with the purchaser (in this case ESA).

But there have also been other motors of "projectification" in the public sector, not least through the influence of the European Union. To receive financial resources from the EU, the

applying public offices need to stick to the rules of the union and to the standard project model prescribed by the EU bureaucrats. These types of projects can be characterized as PNWs with a multitude of acting agencies involved. The observation is also that some public offices have been changed to become fully projectified, in the sense that all activities are converted to be projects even though those activities are recurrent, yearly.

The expanding and more diversified use of project organization is also reflected by the development of supportive institutions related to the project field. In 1994, the Swedish Project Academy was established as a cooperative venture between project managers, consultants in the area as well as academics related to the field (Lundin and Söderholm, 2012). The goals were to establish contacts between the three different types of actors with an interest in project activity and to initiate practically useful research in the project area. Since 1995 the Academy has been selecting “The Project Manager of the Year”. Interviewing these managers has provided an opportunity to tell a story about the development of concerns in project management and leadership over the years (Wenell, 2014).

A wide range of projects and project managers have been selected over the years. Some of them can be characterized as conventional (but extremely big) industrial and engineering projects related to military airplanes, space and transport industry, etc. But the selection of the receivers of the award also reflects a widening approach to the phenomenon of projects and project management over the years. There are cases where the project manager selected can be regarded as an entrepreneur dedicated to a special venture. Examples are the project managers of the World championship in Biathlon, the World Scout Jamboree, the Eurovision Song Contest. All these managers or rather leaders share personal engagement, passion, energy and professionalism in their way to handle the projects. That also goes for the creator of a very special museum (graphic arts) much less observed by the public at large.

One conspicuous example in terms of less conventional project concerns the project manager of the “Save the Sea-Eagle Project”. The story is about a “soul of fire” who had written his doctoral thesis about the life of eagles at a time when they were an endangered species due to a diversity of causes, like poisons spread by humans in nature and destruction by humans of sea-eagle nests. By recruiting volunteers to protect sea-eagle nests, gaining financial support from official funds and by getting non-poisonous food for the sea-eagles, the decline in sea-eagle families was broken and over some years – a decade or so - the number of sea-eagle families in the country many-folded. This was a very special project with a tentative goal, initially without financial resources and without a clear plan. One way to describe it is to say it is a special network project. Furthermore, the process and the development aspects are apparent with a mixture of entrepreneurial elements and instances of traditional project planning.

Up until recently, development of the project area can in many ways be described as a tool for control. However, at the same time the world has been changing so project has become a household word (possibly due to successes ascribed to project work) labeling a manifold of applications in a widening area. Over the years, it seems that project work “in Swedish” also has a democratic touch to it. The formal project manager is not the only locus of control but participants also have a definite say. The message from Wenell, underlined by his interviews

with the "Project Managers of the Year", is that successful leadership is related to the ability to communicate and to create an enthusiastic team working for a common goal. In the Project Academy, some of the members even talk about project of the year (as opposed to project manager of the year) to stress the cooperative aspects of projects.

Over the years, projectification seems to have become a standard in working life, as well as in the way we think and express ourselves which justifies the use of the term Project Society referred to in the title of the book; "Managing and Working in Project Society". The role of "projectification" in the future is of course uncertain but its influence in modern Society is no doubt more profound than even imagined.

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## About the Authors



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**Torbjörn Wenell** is one of the most experienced consultants in the project area in the Nordic countries in Europe. He has made it his task to develop the project work form in practice since the beginning of the 60's. He has been dealing with projects in several industries and has been responsible for educating some 150 thousand people in the project field. He started by planning for the development of computers at SAAB in 1961 and planned for the electronic system in the Viggen military aircraft. In 1963 – 1965 he worked as a project planning expert for Ericsson and finalized the first handbook of project planning for that company. In 1965 he started a project consultancy, Wenell Management AB, where he was the chairman of the board until 2000. During several years, he was also connected to the University of Linköping as a PM expert. In 1967 he initialized the association called “Svenskt Projektforum” for people with an interest in the field and in 1994 he contributed to the start of the Swedish Project Academy where he served as secretary for 15 years.

In total, he has authored nine books about projects of which “*Wenell on Projects*” received a special award. In 1961 he got his engineer title and since then he has gone through other educational programs as well. However, in PM he is a self-taught person. Torbjörn can be contacted at [torbjorn.wenell@gmail.com](mailto:torbjorn.wenell@gmail.com)



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**Eskil Ekstedt** became Ph.D in Economic History at Uppsala University in 1976 and full professor at the University of Stockholm and the National Institute for Working Life in Stockholm 2001. He has had academic positions at the University of Uppsala, the FA Institute, University of Stockholm and The National Institute for Working Life. He was an expert to the Swedish State Commission on Productivity ( 1991), to the Swedish State Commission on Competence (1992) and to the Swedish State

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Ekstedt is one of the authors to the book “*Neo-industrial organising. Renewal by action and knowledge formation in a project intensive economy*” (Routledge, 1999). He is also co-author of the book [Managing and Working in Project Society: Institutional Challenges of Temporary Organizations](#), published in 2015 by Cambridge University Press and winner of the 2016 PMI Book of the Year award. Prof. Ekstedt can be contacted at [eskil.ekstedt@ekhist.uu.se](mailto:eskil.ekstedt@ekhist.uu.se)



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He is the lead author of the monograph [Managing and Working in Project Society: Institutional Challenges of Temporary Organizations](#), published in 2015 by Cambridge University Press winning the 2016 PMI Book of the Year award. Rolf is active in the Swedish Project Academy. He can be contacted at [Rolf.A.Lundin@ju.se](mailto:Rolf.A.Lundin@ju.se).