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Establishing a body of knowledge and research Agenda for Commercial Management

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts the role of commercial managers from a range of organisations and across industry sectors within the UK, as a first step in developing a body of knowledge for commercial management. It contends that there are persuasive arguments for considering commercial management, not solely as a task undertaken by commercial managers, but as a discipline in itself: a discipline that bridges traditional project management and organisational theories. While finding differences in approach and application both between and within industry sectors, it establishes sufficient similarity and synergy in practice to identify a specific role of commercial management in project-based organisations. These similarities encompass contract management and dispute resolution; the divergences include a greater involvement in financial and value management in construction and in bid management in defence/aerospace.

It advocates the utilisation of the Internet to establish loosely based ‘communities of practice’ as a vehicle to disseminate good practice and cutting edge research pertinent to commercial managers. Also, the development of a body of knowledge for commercial management is recommended and key areas for targeted research to underpin the discipline proposed. These areas include: relationship management, value and value management, risk and uncertainty management, performance measurement, procurement and supply chain management, contract management, dispute resolution and conflict management, cost management, organisational learning and knowledge management, and bidding.

Keywords: Commercial management, commercial manager, management of projects.

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have seen an increase in the number of individuals within organisations assuming the title 'Commercial Manager', so that commercial managers can now be found across a spectrum of industries, especially those that are predominantly project based. In the UK construction industry, for example, a clear trend can be observed of the role of the traditional contractor’s quantity surveyor evolving into that of a commercial manager.

The aim of the research that underpins this paper (see, Lowe and Leiringer, 2005, Lowe and Leiringer, 2006 and Lowe with Leiringer, 2006) was to investigate the role of commercial managers across a variety of industry sectors in order to establish whether or not commercial management could be identified as a distinct discipline. Specific objectives were to:

- Establish the position of commercial managers in their organisation and their involvement with projects
• Identify the functions considered by commercial managers to be important to their day-to-day role and to ascertain their interactions with other actors in the project environment.
• Investigate similarities and differences in these functions between commercial managers from different industry sectors.
• Highlight areas held to be important in the professionalization of commercial management as a discipline.
• Identify an inter-disciplinary research agenda for commercial management

Defining commercial management

As previously mentioned, the term ‘commercial management’ has been used for quite some time, not least in construction, cf. Cottrell (1979) who refers to the job title ‘commercial manager’ in builder’s organisations. Yet, research has shown that there is no consensus over what commercial management is or, for that matter, what a commercial manager does (Lowe et al. 1998). In their thorough literature review Lowe et al. failed to unearth any definitive statements of what was meant by commercial management or descriptions of the tasks and skills associated with the role of a commercial manager. This paucity of literature categorised as commercial management was again confirmed by this current study. This is not to say that research has not been conducted in this domain. On the contrary, there is an abundance of literature addressing issues associated with commercial management (e.g. Scott (1974); Gilbreath (1983); and Turner (1995)).

Two main interpretations tend to stand out in construction-related literature: the first sees commercial management as a subset of project management on individual projects, and a second uses ‘quantity surveying’ and ‘commercial management’ interchangeably:

1. Thomas and Adams (1995) consider the commercial manager to be subsumed within the project team, to be subservient to the project manager but responsible for the planning engineer, contract manager and cost engineer/quantity surveyor. Moreover, the current Association for Project Management BOK, developed by the Centre for Research in the Management of Projects at UMIST (Morris et al. 2000; Morris, 2001) contains a section labelled ‘Commercial’, thus placing commercial management within the context of project management and at the project level. It is contended that commercial issues may drive the conduct of a project, while the ‘Commercial’ section, as defined by Morris and the APM team, involves the business case, marketing and sales, financial management, procurement and a legal awareness.

2. Cottrell (1979) and more recently Walker and Wilkie (2002) hold the title ‘commercial manager’ to be synonymous with that of the builder’s/contractor’s quantity surveyor: a role that is integrated into the management of a project and to involve valuation of work, change management, financial accounting and subcontractor administration. This line of reasoning is further supported by the fact that it is not uncommon for contemporary private quantity surveying practices to advertise their services as commercial management. Furthermore, other commentators have noted that the contractor’s quantity surveyor is now cast in the role of a financial manager, providing financial control of projects; see for example Pearson (1996). Research has been conducted in the construction sector into the role of the quantity surveyor both in consultancy and construction companies; see for example Cottrell (1979), Bennett (1989), Male (1990), RICS (1984, 1991 & 1992), Cornick and Osbon (1994), and Fortune and Skitmore (1994), against which this current investigation into the role of commercial managers can be compared.
Derived from The Oxford Modern English Dictionary definitions of Commercial and Management, Lowe et al. (1998) defined commercial management as:

‘The process of controlling or administering the financial transactions of an organisation with the primary aim of making a profit.’

This echoes the findings from their study (Lowe et al. 1998 and Lowe and Fenn, 1997), which concluded that the most common description of commercial management in the UK construction industry was: ‘looking after the profits of the company… by keeping costs to a minimum and maximising income’.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Limitation of scope

It is acknowledged that commercial managers could be found in a diversity of industries. The research initiative reported in this paper is limited in scope to investigating commercial management practice in project-based industries within the UK. Thus, it deals with firms those work consists of undertaking certain activities on projects or, if the organisations are mainly operationally oriented, undertaking projects as an important part of their overall activity. Construction, Telecommunications/ICT and Defence/Aerospace were chosen as suitable for the investigation.

Research method

The empirical research has been conducted in four separate stages. The first stage consisted of a literature review and analysis of over 100 job advertisements for commercial managers. Stage two comprised a pilot questionnaire sent to commercial managers in a large telecommunications company. This organisation was selected because it had a long established and defined commercial management function. The questionnaire targeted their roles in the various divisions of the organisation. The findings were compiled and further corroborated through in-depth interviews with two senior commercial managers in the company. As the findings were biased towards the telecommunication industry, further interviews were subsequently conducted with commercial managers from construction companies. These actions enabled the research team to create a generic questionnaire that could be fielded to commercial managers in most sectors. The third stage involved a large-scale questionnaire survey of commercial managers in the Construction, Telecoms/ICT and Defence/Aerospace industries. All the commercial managers surveyed were employed by corporate organisations within a business-to business context. Within the context of construction, for example, the organisations could be classified as main contractors. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. Part A comprised an experience profile, which provided information concerning the position of the subject in their organisation. Part B concerned the respondent’s involvement with projects, the identification of functions considered to be important to their day-to-day role as a commercial manager and their interaction with other actors in the project environment. Part C provided an opportunity for respondents to record their own personal experiences and to highlight areas held to be important to the development of commercial management as a discipline. The fourth and final stage involved the presentation and validation of the questionnaire results by means of a focus group comprising 8 representative senior commercial managers and three academics.
Analysis

Data analyses were undertaken using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS for Windows, release 11.0.0). Descriptive statistics were calculated for each variable. The variables were then analysed for differences between subgroups based on the industry sector of the respondents (Construction, Defence/Aerospace and Telecoms/ICT) by means of the Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance $H$ test. Where significant differences were indicated by this test the Mann-Whitney $U$ test was used to investigate differences between the groups pair-wise. This analysis was exploratory in nature and is, therefore, interpreted by reference to significance levels (two-tailed). Finally, hierarchical cluster analysis was used to cluster the functions of a commercial manager into homogeneous groups.

The findings presented in this paper are based on 106 responses distributed between Construction (42), Telecoms/ICT (33) and Defence/Aerospace (31). Full details of the statistical analysis can be found in Lowe and Leiringer (2005).

THE ROLE OF COMMERCIAL MANAGERS

While in some construction organisations the title ‘commercial manager’ was found to be reserved for individuals who were involved at a high level in their organisation, in others it was used interchangeably with that of the contractor’s quantity surveyor. This was indicated by the general high level of consistency in the responses from the construction sector when the quantity surveying respondents were both included and excluded from tests for differences.

Contrary to the view that commercial management is a function of project management on specific projects, the findings indicate that commercial management goes beyond projects. The majority of the respondents worked on multiple projects or were not allocated to specific projects, of those allocated to only one project the majority were from the construction sector.

The involvement of commercial managers in projects varied between the industries. A tendency was revealed for individuals in the Telecoms/ICT and Defence/Aerospace sectors to be appointed earlier in the project life cycle than those in the construction sector. This was evident from the fact that commercial managers in the construction sector were mainly involved in contract administration activities with project execution dominating their time, whilst commercial managers in the other sectors were predominantly involved in pre-contract activities with project development dominating their time. This difference between the sectors is perhaps a result of the traditional division of the commercial function in the construction industry in the UK, the estimating department being responsible for pre-contract activities but the quantity surveying section taking responsibility for contract administration activities (Brown, 1997).

As for what the commercial manager actually does once involved in the projects, the three industries show both similarity and divergence. Contract management, comprising: contract negotiation, contract formulation, and risk management; and the functions dispute resolution and bidding were generally consistently seen as forming part of the role of the commercial manager, although bidding and contract formulation were not seen as being quite so important in the construction sector. The latter could be explained in part by the greater tendency to use standardised contracts in construction compared to the other two sectors and that pre-contract activity is largely confined to business development, board and estimation departments in construction.
Another area that showed convergence between the three industries was research and development, which was stated by virtually all to be outside the remit of commercial management. Indeed, the similar areas of opportunity development (in particular marketing, image/reputation management and development appraisal) and innovation management were consistently viewed as support functions.

Areas of particular interest in which the three industries differ include bid management and financial management. Bid management was seen as a part of the role of a commercial manager in the Defence/Aerospace sector, whereas there was a tendency in Construction and Telecoms/ICT to view bid management more as a support function. Financial management (comprising functions such as cost management and cost value reconciliation), value management and supplier management (particularly sub-contracting administration) were seen to be integral parts of the role of the commercial manager in the construction sector, while in Telecoms/ICT and Defence/Aerospace involvement in these areas was generally in a support capacity. Again, this could be explained by peculiarities in the industry sectors and by the fact that respondents may have found it difficult to accurately distinguish between performing a task as an integral part of their job and providing support to the function.

Finally, there was a general lack of agreement between the sectors on the role commercial managers take concerning the tasks of estimating and acquiring approvals and permits.

Hierarchical cluster analysis was applied to the 28 functions initially held to contribute to the role of the commercial manager. The resulting dendrogram was interpreted and labelled; the subsequent graphical representation was held to represent genuine clusters. At the highest level the functions are split into two groups labelled: Business Delivery and Business Development.

Business Delivery comprises three sub-groups:

- **Commercial Solutions:**
  - Risk/Price Interaction: was further sub-divided into:
    - Contract Management, which includes the functions contract formulation, contract negotiation and risk management.
    - Dispute Resolution
    - Bid management, which includes the functions bidding, procurement strategy, price formulation, business plan development, and creation of outline proposals.
- **Acquiring Approvals and Permits**
- **Technical Solutions:** further sub-divided into:
  - Production/Supply Interaction: comprising:
    - Supplier management, which includes sub-contractor administration, supply chain management, and supplier evaluation.
    - Performance Measurement
    - Innovation Management
    - Quality Assessment
  - Cost/Value Interaction: comprising:
    - Financial Management, which includes cost management, cost value reconciliation, cash flow management, payments, and claims formulation.
    - Value Management
  - Estimating
Business Development comprises two sub-groups:

- Opportunity Development: further subdivided into:
  - Capture management, which includes marketing and sales
  - Image/reputation management
  - Development Appraisal
- Research and development

Overall, the most frequent interactions were between the commercial manager and specialist divisions within their organisation, the client’s representative and the client. Although differences in interaction did occur in industry sectors, for example, in the Telecoms/ICT sector interaction was significantly more frequent between commercial managers and specialist divisions in their organisation but less frequent with the client’s representative, end users and the client. Further, in the construction sector, interaction was significantly more frequent with subcontractors compared with both the Telecoms/ICT and Defence/Aerospace sectors.

Within the context of projects and project-based organisations a modified definition of commercial management can be deduced:

“The management of contractual and commercial issues relating to projects, from project inception to completion.”

Inherent within this definition is the acceptance of the centrality of risk management to commercial management.

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF COMMERCIAL MANAGEMENT

Current professional standing of commercial managers

Predominantly, their responses showed that commercial managers across all three sectors held at least a first degree with a proportion holding higher degrees. Apart from the construction sector, however, where there is a tendency for commercial managers to be corporate members of the RICS and/or the Chartered Institute of Building, there is a distinct lack of professional representation, recognition of the commercial management function and certification of competence to practice. While there are a number of aspiring institutions and associations active in this and in related disciplines, these apparently have not appealed to practising commercial managers in the targeted organisations in Telecoms/ICT and Defence/Aerospace. Indeed, this issue of a lack of professional standing was raised during the interviews.

Increasingly, the lack of status for commercial management has led both individuals and the organisations that employ commercial managers to explore ways of addressing this issue. For example, through the development of an MSc programme in Commercial Management and more recently an MBA for Commercial Executives. Both these programmes were the first of their kind. This impetus for raising the status of commercial management in many ways parallels the emergence of project management in the later part of the 20th century. Consequently, it would appear that we are observing the embryonic stages of the professionalization of the commercial management function.

Foundations of a profession

Whilst there is some debate over what constitutes a profession, the importance of a profession’s knowledge base is widely acknowledged (Eraut, 1994). Moreover, as Eraut
goes on to state, “… the power and status of professional personnel is considerably influenced by the degree to which they can lay claim to unique forms of expertise and the value placed on that expertise”. Unlike medicine or law, commercial management has no discrete knowledge base, as with project management and quantity surveying, for example, it is an amalgam of topics, drawing upon research and emerging practice from a variety of subject areas.

Similarly, Crawford (2004a) asserts, “… a body of knowledge, standards and related assessment and qualification processes can therefore be seen as essential building blocks in the formation and recognition of a profession”. Further she suggests that: the definition of a distinct body of knowledge and the development of standards, providing a baseline for competence, are important building blocks in professional recognition for individuals and for an emerging profession. Bodies of knowledge are, therefore, used to provide a consistent structure for professional development programmes, the certification of professionals, and accreditation of education programmes. Moreover, within the filed of project management, they have been a significant feature as the discipline aspires to recognition as a profession.

**Bodies of knowledge**

Frequently, mature professions, to protect their position, seek to define themselves in terms of their core skills/competencies and/or knowledge base (see, e.g. RICS, 1992: which sought to establish the core skills and knowledge base of the Chartered Quantity Surveyor). Likewise, project management associations, for example, the International Project Management Association (Caupin et al. 1998), the Project Management Institute (PMI, 2000) and the Association for Project Management (Dixon, 2000), have defined bodies of knowledge (BOK), in order to establish what a project management practitioner should be knowledgeable in (i.e. a set of professional competences) to underpin professional certification. According to Gale (2004), standards relating to competence fall into two main areas: those describing what a practitioner is expected to know and those describing what practitioners are expected to be able to do. The latter primarily takes the form of performance-based or occupational competence standards. He states that the assumption behind their development and use (in the case of project management) is that they describe the requirements for effective performance in the workplace. However, the purpose of bodies of knowledge extends beyond providing a basis for establishing competence to practice. According to Morris (2001), they should reflect the purpose and provide a set of topics, relationships, and definitions of a particular domain, reflecting, therefore, a distinct professional discipline.

Arising from the development of the APM Body of Knowledge, Morris (2004) refers to the transition of project management to the ‘Management of Projects’ (Morris, 1994), which takes into account the projectization of organisations. Within the management of projects model, he sees project managers as the vehicle through which not only, projects and portfolios and programmes of projects are delivered but also strategy is delivered. Morris’s stance is somewhat expansionist, positioning project managers at the centre of the management of projects. Further, in Morris’ definition of project management and the APM Body of Knowledge which he helped develop, there is an attempt to claim the commercial function as part of or subservient to project management. Observations of the practice of commercial management across several industry sectors (see previous section) leads to the conclusion that, far from being subservient, commercial management is a distinct although parallel process within commercial, business to business organisations.
Developing a body of knowledge for commercial management

The research base and body of knowledge of a discipline are, therefore, intrinsically linked: the establishment of a research agenda and body of knowledge fundamental to the professionalization of the commercial management function. In proposing the development of a body of knowledge for commercial management the following aims, adapted from the aims set by UMIST’s Centre for Research into the Management of Projects (Morris et al. 2000 and Morris, 2001) when undertaking the development work for the Fourth Edition of the Association for Project Management Body of Knowledge, are proposed; to:

- Ascertaining and classifying the topics that commercial management professionals deem necessary to be known and understood by those claiming to be competent in commercial management
- Defining what is meant by those topics at a generically useful level.
- Developing the body of literature that supports these topic areas
- Developing a body of knowledge that best represents commercial management.

The International Project Management Association (IPMA) classifies project management under four levels:

- Project director
- Project manager
- Project management professional
- Project management practitioner.

Similarly, in commercial management several organisations, for example Rolls-Royce and BT, have identified and defined generic role and competencies at: commercial director, commercial executives, commercial manager, commercial adviser, and commercial officer level. This initial work may inform the development of a commercial management body of knowledge.

A community of practice for commercial management

Returning to the need to raise the status of commercial managers, an obvious development would be the establishment of a generic institute or association to represent commercial managers, disseminate good practice and certify competency to practice. However, these formal structures might perhaps represent 19th century ideals more than the current aspirations of commercial management practitioners. Possibly a more progressive response would be to utilise the Internet to establish loosely based ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as a vehicle to disseminate good practice and cutting edge research pertinent to commercial managers. In support of this proposition, Crawford (2004b) notes that, between the members of the global community of project management practice, the majority of activity promoting global communication and cooperation (the free sharing and exchange of ideas) is happening outside recognized organisations, through online discussion groups and unofficially initiatives. However, in order to support a ‘community of practice’ there is still a requirement to establish a research foundation by co-ordinating the disparate strands of research currently being undertaken and to produce an associated body of knowledge to underpin the development of commercial management as a distinct discipline.
RESEARCH AGENDA

Core challenges for commercial management

Research, as previously mentioned, forms the foundations of a profession. Lowe (2006) seeks to establish a research agenda for the development of an underlying theory relevant to commercial management, revealing several areas of synergy and recurring themes. These include:

- **Relationship management**: for example, the management of internal interfaces between different units within the organisation and external interfaces with purchasers, suppliers and other collaborators/partners.
- **Value and Value management**: for example, the implications and opportunities derived form the introduction of Best Value legislation on the development of value management, procurement strategies based on value optimisation rather than price minimization, and bidding models that allow the assessment of alternative value/price combinations.
- **Risk and uncertainty management**: for example, in terms of managing risks associated with relationship breakdown, financing life-cycle solutions and project delivery, and in terms of risk aversion and performance measurement.
- **Performance measurement**: linked to performance-based contracts, performance/continuous improvement, competitive advantage, customer focus, cultural differences and the effectiveness of marketing.
- **Procurement and supply chain management**: the introduction of integrated logistics, the retention and development of an effective procurement function following outsourcing, marketing and organisational structures aimed at specific procurement routes, as a driver of trust, the performance measurement of members of integrated supply chains, and the need for new financial structures for companies in the supply chain. Other allied and recurring themes include partnering and the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility.
- **Contract Management**: the development of new contractual mechanisms to give effect to emerging business models, the implications of the transactional cost perspective on the development of contracts, partnering and performance based contracts, the development of service level agreements and other contractual documents associated with outsourcing, and the implications of culture on the application of specific contract terms.
- **Dispute resolution and conflict management**: the development of predictive tools based on an aetiological approach, relationship management; in particular, the implications of relative power positions within supply chains, government intervention to introduce mandatory arbitration, the implications of culture on the willingness of parties to pursue claims under a contract.
- **Cost Management**: in terms of developing appropriate cost vale reconciliation mechanisms that can also be integrated into performance measurement systems, and support the development of a transactional cost perspective, more appropriate cost estimating and project selection.
- **Organisational learning and knowledge management**: in particular the instigation of post-project evaluation, is associated with the development of competitive advantage, procurement processes, and performance indicators. Further applications are in the development of risk, bidding and dispute prediction models.

Further areas of commonality include trust, competition, marketing, lean thinking, bidding and the development of new professional roles and responsibilities. Also, Lowe (2006) found agreement in that there should be more interaction between academics and
practitioners in order to develop innovative and appropriate models, systems and practices to support the emerging practice of commercial management.

Finally, in terms of an underlying theory of Commercial Management, Winch (2006) advocates that if the transactional cost approach can be empirically realised commercial management will have been placed on a sound empirical and theoretical foundation. However, due to the eclectic nature of commercial management, there are other potential sources for a theoretical foundation to the discipline, for example, arising from the legal aspects of the function: contract formulation, negotiation and deal creation. It is more likely, therefore, that there are several interlinking theories underpinning the discipline.

**A research network in commercial management**

To support this formative research agenda and to underpin the development of the emerging discipline, it is proposed that a new research network in commercial management be established:

- Create a new multi-disciplinary network of academics, researchers and practitioners interested in developing the subject of commercial management and improving commercial practice
- Identify and define a new inter-disciplinary research agenda as part of a wider community of practice for commercial managers

In addition to the specific topics identified above this research agenda should aim to:

- Investigate the developing practice of commercial management across different industries and sectors within the context of the increasing significance of ‘projects’ to organisations and markets, and the application of programme and portfolio management; the increasing complexity of engineering projects; emerging project concepts and practices; and the growing recognition of the need to raise the status of commercial managers.
- Advance a theory or theories of commercial management bearing in mind the developing theories of the ‘project management’, the ‘management of project portfolios, ‘programme management’ and in particular, Morris’s concept of the ‘management of projects’.
- Establish of a commercial management body of knowledge bearing in mind the criticisms that has been levelled at the content of the various project management bodies of knowledge and the mechanisms and techniques used to establish them, in particular the their inability to explain the behaviour of complex projects.
- Apply a wide range of research perspectives that encompass, both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ systems thinking, and systems dynamics.
- Generate and communicate new research programmes and topics pertinent to the emerging discipline of commercial management.

As an initial step, a development workshop was held as part of the International Commercial Management Symposium hosted by the University of Manchester, UK on 7th April 2005. The workshop facilitated a discussion between key academic in the field and senior practitioners from the major project based industries. One outcome of the meeting was a consensus on the need to establish an underlying body of knowledge for commercial management. A second was the acknowledgement that, in the case of commercial management, the majority of the underlying knowledge resides with practitioners, not academics.
CONCLUSIONS

This paper has compared and contrasted the role of commercial managers from a range of organisations and across industry sectors. While revealing differences in approach and application both between and within industry sectors, it has established sufficient similarity and synergy in practice to identify a specific role of commercial management in project-based organisations. These areas of similarity encompass contract management and dispute resolution; whereas the areas of divergence include a greater involvement in financial and value management in construction and bid management in defence/aerospace.

In the construction sector, there is a tendency for commercial managers to be corporate members of the RICS and/or the Chartered Institute of Building. Outside construction, however, there is a distinct lack of professional representation and recognition. As commercial managers and their employers endeavour to raise the status of commercial management, parallels have been drawn with the emergence of project management in the late 1950’s and 1960’s, and its development during the latter half of the last century to become a widely recognised core competency with aspirations towards professional status. While the more obvious development would entail the creation of a generic institute or association to represent commercial managers, disseminate good practice and certify competency to practice, perhaps these formal structures represent 19th century ideals more than current aspirations. Possibly a more progressive response would be to utilise the Internet to establish loosely based ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as a vehicle to disseminate good practice and cutting edge research pertinent to commercial managers.

Finally, the paper has sought to validate the establishment of a research network and an associated research agenda to support both the practice and professionalization of commercial management. It recommends the development of a body of knowledge for commercial management and proposes key areas for targeted research to underpin the discipline. These areas include: relationship management, value and value management, risk and uncertainty management, performance measurement, procurement and supply chain management, contract management, dispute resolution and conflict management, cost management, organisational learning and knowledge management, and bidding.

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