Szent István University

Doctoral School of Management and Business Administration

PhD thesis papers

Importance and acceptance of the project management approach in private life

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION OF THE TOPIC, HYPOTHESES

In my thesis I discuss the usability, current practice and future potential of project management (hereinafter: PM) based on the information I collected about the new aspects of the applicability of PM. My own and family's example convinced me that determination and diligence is truly effective only when directed by a clear and unambiguous guideline. Since I met project writing tasks when I was young, it was apparent to me that PM tools can serve as such a guideline.

Therefore, I started thinking about the possible obstacles that prevent people from using this well developed and useful supporting tool. The reason is probably they don't know it and have never experienced it. The solution seemed simple: to spread PM knowledge as widely as possible. The picture became more complex for me when I realized that some of those who already met this concept and tool in their work did not favor of using it in private life. Some people experience the effectiveness of PM day by day, but still don't think that the same concept may make other parts of their lives more efficient.

My discussions and readings have convinced me that the need, possibility or even impossibility of using project management in private life is an undiscovered field in today's literature. Only a few websites mention the idea, advertising some sort of "we will change your life" business offers, but without studying the obstacles or possibilities of such application even to a minimum extent. There is no scientific literature discussing this topic. It feels like it's predestinated that project management is developed for a special field of business life, and therefore can only be applied there. Lots of academic papers try to find an answer to the question "What is project". This implies to me that the problem for their authors is also to answer the question: which parts of life can be regarded as project, or in other words: where can project management concept be applied.

In my opinion, business tasks managed traditionally with project approach and PM tools are part of the real life just like daily things to do. As a housewife and mother, the PM tools have helped my life so many times, and as an entrepreneur

I often turn to the psychological guidelines of family life, or their 'commercialized' equivalent: the HR management.

I cannot separate my life in a way that happiness and fulfilment belongs to the family, while competition and effectiveness is part of the business. I strive for happiness in my business and emphasize effectiveness in my family.

Due to all the above, I wrote my university thesis about project management, and have been interested in this topic since then. I started a questionnaire survey in 2017, results of which show that there is open chance to apply PM in private life and work. Some people are interested in it, do not refuse it, and, consciously or not, already apply some element of it.

My thesis presents the results of the survey referred to above.

I formulated three hypotheses in the beginning of my research.

H1. I assume that most of the respondents do not know the techniques, elements and advantages of project management in business and especially in private life, even though they know the meaning of term 'project'.

My assumption is based on my everyday experience. Project work has spread in Hungary since the 1990s, and become part of the normal business life. However, there are many who formulate their ideas in details and writing only when pushed by an external force (e.g. submission of a tender). It's a common practice even among those who regularly submit tenders to employ a consultant, extension agent or a special staff of the enterprise, etc. to write documentation and handle project management tasks. Consequently, they never experience the advantages and benefits of project management, and only consider it as an administrational task or a tool that supports control.

H2. I assume that respondents who have directly experienced the advantages of project work in their duties show more willingness to apply project management in private life than those who have never worked in a project team.

I assume that those who have already worked in a project workgroup easily recognize the applicability and usefulness of project management beyond business life, even in private life. However, my former experience shows that some of them, though considering the practice of project management useful, think that it's distant from family and private life (for being too bureaucratic, emotionless, insensitive). Other may have used some elements and steps of project management in their private life without consciously

H3. I assume that the attitude of using project management in work and/or private life show different picture by age group and gender.

Project work has spread nearly three decades ago in Hungary, and entrepreneurs initially approached it with a lot of aversion. It was especially the creation of project document, accurate goals, outcomes, results and effects that caused difficulties for entrepreneurs who just got to learn about the use of computers back then. However, young generations meet computers, internet, smart phones at a very early age, and therefore can use the digital world and language (computer English) more easily. This is why I assume that they are more comfortable in the world of projects than the older generations. I expect a difference of responses by gender on the basis of an idea expressed by my Austrian research partner during a formal interview. They stated that women, due to their higher and more diverse workload, apply project management tools more intensively than men, since women often fulfill dual roles (family and work). (SIETAR Austria, 2018).

2.   PRECEDENTS OF THE WORK, OBJECTIVES

As evidenced by the literature I studied, this topic has not been researched yet. It seems that those interested in project and project management have not made a research that is aimed at the possibility of using PM in private life.

The goal of my research is to obtain information about the current awareness and usefulness of project management beyond business life, in order to support the spread of PLM concept and techniques.

As for me, I have worked in projects for over 10 years and started scientifically studying projects 7 years ago, when I wrote and defended my university thesis titled "The study of relationship between leader and project manager role" at the Szent István University, Institute of Social Sciences, Management Studies. First, I was interested in the specific management principles of project management. My first publications, presentations printed papers, were prepared in back in those years. Please see a detailed list of them in the List of publications.

I gradually showed interest in a concept titled Project Life Management (PLM), and managed to win several university teachers and researchers from Gödöllő, Pécs, Budapest and Miskolc Universities over to this topic. With their support I managed to publish a handbook titled "Conscious life guidance. Project approach in private life" consisting over 600 pages. I edited this lengthy book with my thesis advisor, professor József Poór, who also contributed to the 15-page Introduction chapter.

Upon publication of the book I organized a conference in Hotel Eger & Park**** hosting 250 pax to promote the topic and the book, as well as to strengthen the scientific basis of the concept. Representatives of the involved ministries, leaders of non-governmental organizations, teachers, research workers and, of course, the authors held their presentations at the conference. This event was also a great opportunity for making formal and informal interviews and widen the supporting or opposing opinions with the most renowned representatives of the field.

I managed to increase the number of research workers working on this topic in the second half of 2017 and in the first quarter of 2018. Due to the successful

EFOP-5.2.2.-17 "Transnational cooperation" tender, teachers and research workers from renowned Croatian, Austrian, Slovakian and Romanian universities joined the Hungarian team, who all showed active interest in the topic. I used the information shared in the discussions with research partners in my thesis.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

3.1. Data collection method

My research is essentially of explorative nature, because this topic has no extensive empirical research history. I prepared a questionnaire to collect information about the application of project-based approach and practices. I was aware of the disadvantages of using a questionnaire, namely respondents may not want and/or be able to provide accurate response to the questions (Malhotra, 2009).

Malhotra's warning increased the doubt in me whether I can trust the responses. It's not about the honesty of respondents, it's more about the accuracy of their knowledge. Those who do not know the basics of project and project work may be prone to give a positive response to questions like "do you apply these procedures and tools in your private life?" I tried to avoid this risk by asking about specifics of the PLM in the questionnaire. If somebody thinks they know and apply project management steps, but in the meantime they don't, then they probably answer "no" to the next question (do you specify deadlines, verifiable milestones for the tasks?)

This same doubt has lead me to the decision to use a scale for most of the questions, asking "how much do you think..." On a scale from 1 to 6, uncertainties may appear, in contrast with dichotomous questions where only yes or no can be replied.

I made the questionnaires available on the internet using Google Forms online application. I understand that this survey form will not deliver a representative result. However, since there are not previous studies, it was unclear in what terms the sample should be representative. By gender, age, education or marital status of the respondents? Representativeness can always be interpreted relatively. As Tamás Rudas (2006) states: A sample may easily be representative from one aspect, but at the same time not representative from another one. A sample could be called absolutely representative if it represented the entire population for all

the questions asked in the study. It's just the most important variables (being the subject of the research work) for what it is impossible to check whether a sample is representative or not. Therefore, no generally representative samples exist. A sample can be representative for a certain set of variables only. I try to find these variables based on the results of my research.

I decided to use internet-based data collection not primarily for comfort reasons. Although, this source of information has the advantage that the collected data do not need to be encoded. Advanced online questionnaire editing tools can extremely increase the efficiency of self-completion (automatic skip in case of specification-type questions, responses selectable from a pull-down menu, etc.) (DRP Handbook, 2009). The most important factor was that I could send my online questionnaire to almost 4000 people in a short time. No other tools could have been able to guarantee that.

My goal was, of course, to make sure my questionnaire gets to the relevant audience.

I tried to focus on two target audiences. One consisted of (approximately two thousand) people who I worked with before. Since I work in an enterprise dealing with projects, my former and current partners have already experienced projects and the PM to some extent. Either they charged us with project writing or project management or have it done by one of their employees, or even the respondent worked with it. Whatever the case was, they all "used" projects in a way. They all received the questionnaire with a short cover letter. Authors of our book "Conscious life guidance" (Lakatosné, Poór, 2017) were sent similar letters. I asked everyone via email to provide responses.

The other target group was the members of LinkedIn, a network of professionals, who share work experience on the site. They communicate in English and Hungarian. The membership is subject to having skills and experience in the given profession, which is then verified based on the profile uploaded. Approximately 3000 members saw my English and Hungarian questionnaire posted in the Project Management subgroup. The translation was proofread by

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people with proficiency in English and project management, as well. Trial questioning was performed by ten students speaking English and Hungarian. However, responses from foreign countries represented only a minor share in the entire sample. Three to four respondents returned responses from other continents (America, Australia). Fifty respondents answered from Europe (but most of them turned out to be Hungarians living abroad). Due to the above, I did not find it necessary to separate responses by continent or country. I only tagged them as "domestic" or "foreign".

I approached 5000 people in total, with an approximately 10% response rate. I'm aware that my sample is not representative, but I managed to include some people having certain experience in project management; those involved in project work; project managers; people being educated about project studies and their trainers, too.

There are several references to informal interviews in my thesis, which I made with professionals skilled in project management. These interviews were conducted in meetings, in the breaks of the above-mentioned conference in Eger, or simply while having a cup of coffee. I did not prepare a written interview script, of course (this is why no such script is attached to this thesis), but I asked the same research questions to all the people I interviewed.

3.2. Analytical method

I analyzed the collected responses with Excel and SPSS software tools. I mainly used two variable cross tabulation tables. I indicated Pearson's chi value under each table, showing the significance of the relationship between the two variables. This value was 0.000 in most cases. I only commented weaker values in the text. The strength of statistically significant relationships are marked using Cramer V coefficients under the tables, while I also included standardized residual values (abbreviated by "Std. res.") in the cells, under the collected data.

I demonstrated only a few partial results with graphs. For the rest of the cases I showed results in tables only. I think this solution is suitable for presenting the

results accurately, nevertheless makes the presentation a little monotonous and "grey".

I used only one multivariate analysis technique. I prepared one factor analysis for a group of variables. I studied the responses to work-life balance in the factor analysis in order to demonstrate relationships more visibly. With respect to the method, I chose the principal component analysis and applied varimax rotation to simplify the the expression of factors. Prior to analyzing the results, I studied whether data are suitable for factor analysis. The KMO indicator was in the acceptable range (Székely – Barna 2002), and the significance level of Bartlett test implies that the variables involved in the study correlate. (Sajtos – Mitev 2007) With this in mind, I performed the analysis of variables. In the next step, I examined the distribution of scores of the factors for some important variables.

4. RESULTS

I was surprised to learn that almost one third of my respondents (27.7%) claimed to know project management "well". For verification purposes, I compared their responses to their participation in project work. (Table 1)

Table 1: Awareness of PM elements, steps and tool by the level of participation in project work (%)

Worked in the project team	Awareness of PM			Total
	doesn't know	heard of it	knows it well	
no	47.5	42.9	9.5	100.0
Std. res.	3.7	1.8	-6.2	
once or twice	26.5	34.7	38.8	100.0
Std. res.	-1.0	-0.3	1.5	
several times	1.0	18.6	80.4	100.0
Std. res.	-5.8	-3.0	10.1	
Total	*35.4*	*38.9*	*27.7*	*100.0*

(Pearson's chi square: 0,000; df: 4; Cramer's V: 0.463)

Source: Own editing, 2018

The results are convincing: less than 10% of the respondents claimed to know project management "well" without having experience in project work. They may have met it during their studies. However, 40 and 80 percent of those having experience in project work know the steps and tools of PM well, respectively.

At the same time, the distribution of responses by age shows that the youngest generation barely knows PM practices. None of them responded to know it "well" and only 10 percent of them "heard of it".

In the next part of my questions, I asked for the opinions of respondents about the usability of PM in private life. I asked responses separately for the applicability of PM knowledge domains and the knowledge and tools related to project cycles.

The names of knowledge domains seemed to be more familiar for the respondents, which may explain that more respondents found them applicable than project cycle steps.

The figure below (Figure 1) shows the responses related to usability of tasks and tools of cycles in private life.
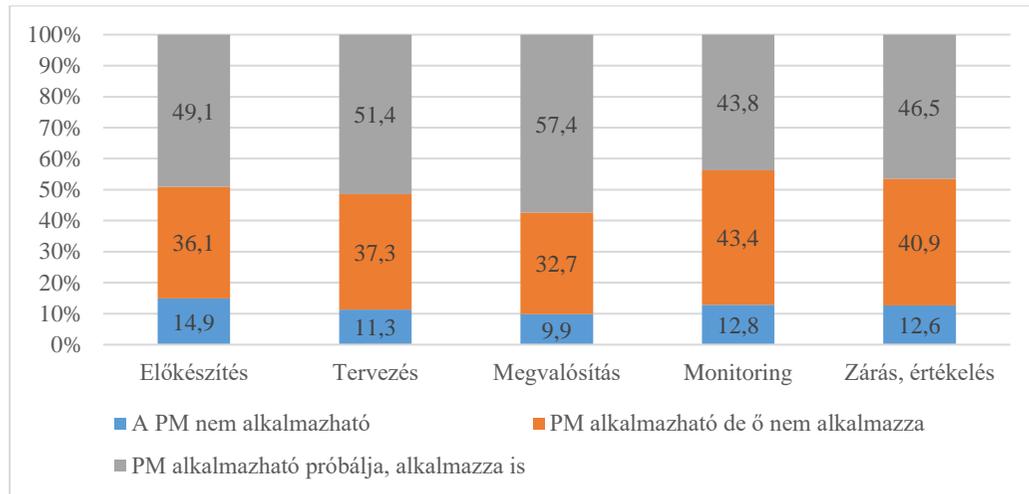
Figure 1: Distribution of responses about applicability and application of the PM tasks of project cycles in private life (%)
Source: Own editing, 2018

10-15% of the respondents thought that PM tools are not suitable for managing private life. However, almost half of the respondents found it not only applicable, but stated to apply (or try to apply) them in other fields of their life-
Relatively many respondents (32-42%) expressed that although PM tools may be used in private life, they do not try to use them.

Table 2: Extreme opinions about applicability of knowledge domains by experience in project work (%)

Member of the project team	None of them applicable	Intermediate value	All applicable and applied	Total
not involved	3.4	84.0	12.6	100.0
Std. res.	-0.6		-2.0	
1-2 times	8.3	73.8	17.9	100.0
Std. res.	1.9		-0.2	
several times	3.2	71.1	25.7	100.0
Std. res.	-0.7		2.2	
Total	4.2	77.1	18.7	100.0

(Pearson's chi square: 0,000; df: 40; Cramer's V: 0.30

Source: Own editing, 2018

The table above (Table 2) shows the two extremes of the scale values related to the applicability of PM, by the experience in project work. One extreme ("none of them applicable") shows the answers of those who totally refused the applicability of ever knowledge domain, while the other extreme ("all applicable and applied") includes the answers of those who gave this response to every knowledge domain. The "intermediate values" group comprises the non-extreme views, where respondents gave different opinions about the applicability of different knowledge domains.

The data indicate that the more project experience a respondent has, the more probably the given person will deem every PM knowledge domain applicable in private life. However, there is no such a relationship among those who totally refused the concept. Those who have never participated in a project work refuse

the applicability of knowledge domains nearly in the same rate as those who already participated in several project works.

Closing questions of my questionnaire referred to the work-life balance. I made a factor analysis for these responses. Two out of the four factors were related to preferring working at home, and two (more important) factors were related to how the respondents can organize their lives. "Good managers" can dispose of their time well, are more satisfied with managing their work and private life, while the "disorganized" group is just the opposite. (Table 3)

Table 3: Average factor scores for some variables related to the knowledge and application of PM

Do you know PM?			Were you member of a project team?		
	Good managers	Disorganized		Good managers	Disorganized
No	-.3531253	.3403577	Never	-.0756490	.1553078
Heard of it	.0784133	-.2259853	1-2 times	-.1753849	.1092708
Knows it well	.3502095	-.1354736	Several times	.1629893	-.2213557
Has specific indicators in their written plans			Verifies the executing of their written plans		
	Good managers	Disorganized		Good managers	Disorganized
No	-.1469851	.0905217	No	-.1745474	.0821684
Sometimes	.1391532	.0334823	Sometimes	-.0032125	.2032230
Often	.6052593	-.3391000	Often	.3533226	-.2694237

Source: Own editing, 2018

The distribution of factor scores among respondents to different questions indicate that "good managers" know the PM concept and tools better, have participated in more project works and apply PM tools in their lives, since they assign specific indicators to their written plans, and verify them, as well.

As for the hypotheses I made in the beginning of my thesis, the analysis shows the following picture:

H1. I assume that most of the respondents do not know the techniques, elements and advantages of project management in business and especially in private life, even though they know the meaning of term 'project'.

      Partially proven.

      Almost one third of my respondents claimed to know PM processes and tools "well". Two third of them don't know or only heard of it. Nearly as many respondents claimed to know PM processes and tools "well" as those who participated in project works several times (possibly as a project manager). This leads me to the conclusion that most of them gained their knowledge by practice.

      Based on the above, my hypothesis has partially proven: those who marked to "know it well" really have knowledge about PM. The use of the term "project" in everyday life is not paired with the, similarly pointless, use of the word "project management".

H2. I assume that respondents who have directly experienced the advantages of project work in their duties show more willingness to apply project management in private life than those who have never worked in a project team.

      Partially proven.

      The community of project managers is strongly diverse in the question of PLM. Nearly every four or five of them do not honestly support the

use of PM in private life, however, almost the half of them find it applicable and useful. It seems that 25-25% of the project managers find PM tools and practices useful for a special type of working or special tasks. They think that using PM in the work is "not impossible", but not effective.

H3. I assume that the attitude of using project management in work and/or private life show different picture by age group and gender.

Proven.

Age groups show significant difference not only in the applicability of PM, but also in the knowledge of project management and experience in project work. However, these differences did not show the expected trend. As for the youngest age group (under 23), instead of willing to use PM more actively and easily, most of them do not know components of the project management (Table 6 in the PhD thesis); and do not think that it can be applied in private life (Figure 10, 11 in the PhD thesis). Although young generations meet computers, internet, smart phones at a very early age, and therefore can use the digital world and language (computer English) more easily, they use PM supporting software in a much less rate than the older generations (Figure 16., 17., 18., Table 23 in the PhD thesis).

The attitude of men and women towards PLM shows real and significant differences. Again, the relationship in this question is different from what I expected. I assumed that women use and find project management more applicable in managing their duties due to the dual load of housekeeping and career. In contrast with this, the data show that less women than men find PLM applicable. True enough, less women know PM tools.

4.1. New scientific results

1. The survey has proven that most of the respondents who already met projects in some form do not find it impossible to use project management in a wider extent, and do not refuse to apply project management in everyday life.

2. The survey has confirmed that those who know project management steps and tools "well" can better plan their own and family's, coworker's duties (see Table 11-13 in the PhD thesis).

3. The study has confirmed that those who use project management today can organize their lives more purposefully ("good managers") than those who do not take this chance ("disorganized"), because the latter do not know the concept and practice of project management, and therefore do not apply that.

4. The research has revealed that those who use project management in business life are divided in terms of whether project approach can be used in private life. According to most respondents, Project Life Management can be applied in private life and for strengthening the work-life balance, but a smaller portion of them refuse this.

5. Results of the survey show that younger respondents are in short of project management-related knowledge, have a little experience in project work, do not apply project management tools in organizing their lives and a very few of them think that Project Life Management is a viable and useful concept.

6. The study has shown that women who have some experience in projects and PM possess less information about project management than men in similar situation, and are not (or to a lower extent than men) willing to learn about PM and use it in their private life.

7. My research has revealed that key analytical factors are the age, gender and qualification of respondents.

5.   CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

My data collection and analysis clearly show that my "Project Life Management – project approach in private life" concept is viable and needed by the society. No wonder, since all of us aspire to formalize and automatize many of our routine activities in our work and life, in order to save more time for things that require creativity and are important from emotional aspects. One of the big lessons of project management is that it provides techniques, ranging from problem-solving thinking to the assessment of implementation, to make our dreams and ideas come true. And it does it without eliminating creativity and emotional values from the process.

The data have convinced me that project management tools and processes can be applied both in private life and work, and those who use one or more of these tools in practice can create better balance between two important parts of their lives. Consequently, my concept called Project Life Management (PLM) has reason for existence.

The data (and interviews) have confirmed that those who refuse PLM do not refuse it for principal reasons, they are simply distrustful. They do not trust that effectiveness arising from the "formality" can be harmonized with the emotional (beyond material) aspects of private life.

5.1. The PLM and problem-solving thinking

Problem-solving thinking: ability to create a logical path that connects problems and solutions. It requires discipline in thinking, ability to separate key elements from relatively less important aspects, setting the priority of goals and solutions, assessment of the necessary resources, etc.

It takes skills and experience that can be practiced very well by means of the well-proven knowledge and tools of project writing and project management. Since one of the key requirements for projects is to clearly and undoubtfully define the project task. After the goal is set and sub-targets of the project organization are

defined, a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) must be created. The goal of WBS is to define the activities necessary for the performance of the project task. The WBS serves the same objective as specialization and work distribution in the mass production planning; to adjust different tasks to different people by means of controlled series of activities. Most project planning and controlling methods essentially consist of defining the optimal series of activities and allocating the required resources. In managerial principles, following the metaphor of general system principle, the project must be viewed in whole, focusing on the parts and their interrelations. The better the parts are structured, the better the whole project will be. (Packendorff, 1994). The same applies to the problem-solving thinking. Consequently, my first proposal is to use project management concept and tools in the education for the purpose of developing problem-solving thinking.

5.2. Type of education

Problems-solving thinking can be developed. Also by school education. Unfortunately, the Hungarian education system does not perform very well in this field. „Hungary performed in the middle range of the first PISA (*Program for International Student Assessment*) survey started by OECD (an organization consisting of developed countries) in 2000. Conducted every third year, the Hungarian students performed under the international average in the following surveys, as well. This stagnation was then followed by a dramatic fall two years ago" (Götz, 2014).

The development of problem-solving thinking is not only important and useful for the individuals, irrespective of social status, but also for the entire society.

I find the practice of school projects organized nowadays in Hungary and the neighboring countries very good, especially for their practice-oriented nature. However, this type of training is missing in the higher levels of education. Courses in the higher level education and adult education relate PM almost entirely to business projects. However, project management is not only a business life tool, just like logics are not only supportive of the philosophical thinking. (Let

me add that PM trainers almost always cite private life examples to demonstrate what they talk about.)

Therefore, I propose that the practice of elementary school projects should continue at higher levels of the education, with special reference to project management, but without focusing on business life only. I also propose that the practice-oriented nature of elementary school projects should continue at middle and higher education, to make sure that PM is not a theoretical subject. I can imagine this primarily by training-like classes, which can especially be part of catching-up programs for disadvantaged people.

5.3. Alternatives of the PLM development

Currently, project management is a living management technique only in the business world, however, it could serve the development of private life and work of individuals. By integrating it into the formal education system, it could support the lives of many (especially the disadvantaged people). Other option is that it remains a business tool, in two terms. In one term, it will continue to serve business life, in other term, it is applied by talented entrepreneurs as a personal service in other fields of the life, but as a business enterprise.

I propose that it should become a public asset through the public education, so that people of small means can also use it for supporting their lives.

5.4. Risks of the PLM

"Projectizing" has some risks, too. The main risk lies in the formality of processes and relations with other people. As known, the problem-solving thinking has a psychological approach. So if we consider using PLM in private life of business management, these psychological requirements must also be taken into consideration. A couple of professional authors has already warned for this. Such warnings are scattered yet, but very important.

As written by Murdick in 1976: "the project management approach is intentionally mechanical: it is based on the assumption that if time goals and

financial plans are met, then everything is alright... While project managers are probably aware of the special needs of people, they are essentially task-oriented. Otherwise they would not have been good project managers. ... [However by the employment of workforce] we do not just conclude a labour contract, but also a kind of psychological contract. ... A heavily structured organization, a more directive management, the strengthening of management control ... may cause the employees to responses that may lead to a strongly oppressive management control. ... The change of workplace and personal atmosphere is of great importance in this systematical approach (Murdick, 1976). If this applies to the business life, then it is especially true to managing private and family life.

Therefore, I propose to further develop PLM in a direction adjusted to the needs of primary groups, especially by involving psychologists, sociologists and social workers.

5.5. Additional proposals for PLM research

I think my research is the first step in the spread of PLM. It may be considered as a market research, which shows that there is need and demand for it in the society. In addition to continuing the research work, the most important task is to develop PM training materials that are focused on the emotional and "intangible" elements and assessment tools of the PLM.

Age, gender and education indicators are very important to survey the needs and possibilities in details, so data collection should be representative in terms of these factors.

In my opinion, the attitude of project managers, social workers, psychologists and teachers should be studied more closely. However, this work should not be performed by survey-type data collection, but conducting in-depth interviews instead.

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7.   KEY PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC

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