Gantt Charts revisited: A critical analysis of its roots and implications to the management of projects today - DTU Orbit (09/06/2019)

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Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore a classic tool in project management, which for some has become almost synonymous with project management: the Gantt chart. The Gantt chart was developed in the early twentieth century, at the heart of Scientific Management; yet, the chart is used with very little adaptation across a wide range of types of projects. In this conceptual paper, the authors question its universal and unreflective use.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors analyse the conceptual roots of the Gantt chart, its historical development and use, derive its engrained principles, and analyse its implications to the management of projects.

Findings – While a Gantt chart can be useful to cope with some of the “complicatedness” of projects, and embraces the importance of time and timing, it is based on principles that are not valid to all projects. The consequence is a propagation of a management approach that does not explicitly cope with complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty and change. In that respect, the Gantt chart fails to acknowledge insights from years of organization theory research and project management research with a firm grounding in contingency theory.

Originality/value – While the majority of contemporary project management thinking already accepted that a normative use can be inappropriate, the practice is still pretty much embracing this approach. By showing the conceptual roots of the Gantt chart, the authors hope to make some of its limitations more evident to practitioners and academics, and encourage its use to be more reflective and contextualised.

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