

# Managing Projects Effectively

By BNET Editorial

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Project management is a technique used to organize work into separate, definable units to ease the coordination of different tasks. Although its earliest roots can be traced to the military and the construction industry, NASA's legendary achievement of landing Neil Armstrong on the moon popularized the technique. Since then, Governments and corporations have all embraced project management. Even people managing the simplest tasks can find inexpensive project management software.

Most people are familiar with the term, but few people fully grasp the enormous complexity of full-scale project management. Project management is, in fact, a structured way of working and recording events that can bring order and coherence to any set of tasks with a predetermined goal.

## What You Need to Know

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### How is a project defined?

A project is a task, or set of tasks, undertaken within a specific timeframe and cost constraints that must be accomplished in order to achieve a specified outcome.

### What do all projects have in common?

There are three components to project management. First, each project has a goal. Second, each requires the identification of human and material resources needed to achieve the goal; and, third, each project is accomplished only when the result of the combined use of the resources assigned to it results in an outcome that was originally intended.

Arranging a vacation, decorating a room, building a garden shed, moving to a new house, and organizing a party, are all examples of basic projects. To achieve each of these goals requires attention to the same three basic components of project management as more complex tasks.

The three components are common to all projects, regardless of size, whether you're producing a physical product (such as a bridge or computer system), an activity (like a product launch or sporting event), or a change in circumstances (such as moving to a new location).

## Is that all there is to project management?

No, it is more complex. In addition, all projects have three elements that must be taken into account: time, cost, and quality. Together they are referred to as specifications.

The relationship between these three elements is often pictured as a triangle, with each element joined to the others. These three factors are likely to conflict with one another over the course of a project. Typically, people want *high performance* in a very *short period of time*, at *the lowest possible cost!* However, any one of these factors can be the driver. If one of the three elements is non-negotiable, the other two will need to be adjusted accordingly. Most projects are constrained by at least one of these elements, so you must determine your priorities for whatever project you undertake.

For example, say you had to make all your IT systems year 2000 compliant by the time of the new millennium. Your priorities probably would have been:

- *Time*: to get everything ready before midnight on 31 December 1999.
- *Quality*: continuous IT operation with zero errors at the turn of the new-year.
- *Cost*: whatever necessary to reach the goal of having full IT functionality on January 1, 2000.

When you design a new project, it's useful to use the triangle to determine the drivers and what tradeoffs you are willing to make. Remember, too, in all cases, you are also striving to achieve efficiency while being effective.

The combination of the three components and the three elements, shows that a project has a defined life span, strives to produce a specific, measurable outcome, contains a corresponding set of activities designed to achieve that outcome, and has a limited amount of resources to utilize.

To accomplish the project, you also need an appropriate organization—a structure for all the people involved having well defined roles and responsibilities. Everyone will need to know what to do, why they are doing it, how it must be done, and when they are expected to complete their tasks.

Projects are finite—they have a definite beginning and end. If the timeframe is unclear or you don't have a goal in sight, it's not a project.

## What to Do

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### Understand the three main areas of project management

Projects further the goals of the organization. All projects, large or small, create something new. As a result, they create an uncertain environment; they are managed risks. They obligate people and consume organizational resources. Therefore, project management is a concept that helps organizations achieve its objectives in an efficient and cost effective manner.

Without change, we'd stagnate. Projects help us to develop, but it's important to keep them under control so that they can achieve their objectives. The project manager focuses on three main areas:

- *Business.* Projects must support the organization's strategy and be assigned by appropriate levels of management. Everyone involved must be clear about what the project is, what its targets are, and the benefits to the business. It's the project manager's job to make sure the project has been properly defined and planned from the outset.
- *People.* The project manager identifies the project sponsor (the person who's authorized the project) and appoints people to essential tasks. The project manager also identifies project "champions" who support and promote the major sub-projects necessary to complete the work.
- *Control.* As soon as authorization is received to start work, the project manager must plan the project, assess the risks involved, identify the skills and resources required, and then constantly monitor progress and make necessary adjustments until the targets are successfully reached.

## Develop the Key Skills

The project manager must be very well organized and enjoy the complexity of plans, budgets, people, communications, and keeping the balance between the three elements of time, cost, and quality. Project managers therefore need to have proven expertise in their field as well as sufficient standing to have influence with senior decision makers.

In addition to professional expertise, there are two required skill sets: business and interpersonal.

### Business

The project manager should be able to:

- plan the entire project;
- monitor costs, efficiency, and quality;
- control the project using technical and management skills;
- ensure that all relevant employees participate in decision making;
- assign the right people to the right task at the right time;
- solve complex problems as they arise;
- stay focused on results;

### Interpersonal

Project managers also need to:

- lead by example and mentor others for leadership roles;
- negotiate project requirements, such as schedules and budgets, with senior decision-makers;

- motivate with integrity, sensitivity, and imagination;
- facilitate good relationships among team members;
- communicate clearly with everyone.

These are key, but there are many skills and principles a project manager must learn.

## Be Mindful of the Project Lifecycle

All projects have a natural lifecycle from start to finish.

Closely related to the rational decision making process, the project lifecycle follows a series of steps. Project complexity will determine the time, effort and importance of each step, but whether implicit or explicit, the design of each project will:

- *Evaluate ideas.* This step determines which of many possibilities will be chosen; establishes the business justification for the project; assesses the risks, costs and benefits; and, determines when it will be done.
- *Define and design.* This step determines how the project will unfold, the personnel needed, and what key measures and milestones are necessary to monitor progress. This is the last point at which your project sponsor(s) can make the final decision on whether or not to proceed
- *Build and test.* Create the plans and designs; determine all processes, arrange necessary logistics, and prepare people for the project. As plans unfold, test to make sure that everything works as intended.
- *Implement and review.* As the project unfolds, test and review each component, and refine according to how well the pieces fit together. Then prepare for the full-scale launch of all processes and systems to be collectively activated.
- *Evaluate and monitor.* Following the launch, make sure the expected benefits were achieved. Here, feedback is analyzed for lessons learned and changes to be considered for future projects.

This process doesn't necessarily flow in one smooth sequence. Monitoring and evaluation of plans, budgets, and schedules, occur throughout the project lifecycle. However, identifying the steps ensures that none of them will be left out.

## What to Avoid

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### You Don't Plan Sufficiently

Once approval has been given for a project, it's tempting to immediately implement, planning as you go along. But, the success or failure of reaching your goals will often be determined before you

begin—during the evaluation and the design steps. The 30% to 50% of the project lifecycle that ought to be devoted to planning may be seen as a waste of time. However, research has clearly shown that time spent on the early stages is valuable for several important reasons:

- time to completion decreases significantly
- costs can be cut dramatically.
- objectives and plans are clearer to everyone
- goals are more likely to be achieved.
- early decisions have a far-reaching effect, so mistakes due to lack of rigorous planning are more likely and more costly

As with most business tasks, thorough planning will increase your chances of success.

## **You Fail to Anticipate the Project's Human Impact**

All projects lead to change. All projects will also incur both excitement and resistance—especially among people directly affected by them. Project managers need to articulate the benefits and help others buy-in to the process, as well as the outcome, of implementing the project. Competing projects will also stimulate considerable internal politics, as competing interests wrestle for the allocation of limited resources. Be prepared for a fight when diverse choices and interests vie for project approval.

## **You Get Bugged Down in Project Details**

With so much going on, it's all too easy to get distracted by the details of each individual activity. and the project manager should keep focused on the big picture and ensuring that all activities proceed on course, on time and, preferably, under budget. Don't be tempted to micro-manage, there is plenty for you to do.

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Books:**

Jones, Richard. Project Management Survival: A Practical Guide to Managing and Delivering Challenging Projects, Kogan Page, 2007.

Mulcahy, Rita. PM Crash Course, Premier Edition: A Crash Course in Real-World Project Management. RMC Publications, 2006.

## **Web Sites:**

Project Management Institute: [www.pmi.org](http://www.pmi.org)

American Society for the Advancement of Project Management: [www.asapm.org](http://www.asapm.org)

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