

Introduction to Project Management

~ By Duncan Haughey

In its modern form, project management dates back to the early 1950s, although its roots go further back to the latter years of the 19th century. As businesses realised the benefits of organising work around projects - recognising the critical need to communicate and co-ordinate work across departments and professions - a defined method of project management emerged.



Many organisations today don't employ full-time project managers. Indeed, it's common to pull together a project team to meet a particular need, one that usually involves producing an end product or service that benefits the organisation or effects change. The end result can be tangible or intangible.

Getting to that end result, successfully, is what project management is all about. At its core, then, project management centres on the planning and control of everything involved in delivering the end result - and it's a process that every person on a project team needs to embrace, understand and execute, no matter the experience level.

Even if you lack academic skills in a project methodology, taking a role in a project team provides an excellent learning opportunity, one that can improve your career profile.

Even if you're an experienced manager or team member, a review of the critical - and most basic - elements of project management can inform and improve how effectively you take projects from concept to concrete plan and through to completion.

With that in mind, here's an overview of all that project management encompasses.

Definition

A simple definition of project management includes a handful of key premises:

- Project management is no small task.
- Project management has a definite beginning and end. It's not a continuous process.
- Project management uses various tools to measure accomplishments and track project tasks. These include Work Breakdown Structures, Gantt charts and PERT charts.

- Projects frequently need ad-hoc resources rather than dedicated, full-time positions common in organisations.
- Project management reduces risk and increases the chance of success.

Often, a triangle, commonly called the "triple constraint", is used to summarise project management . The three most important factors are time, cost and scope. These form the vertices with quality as the central theme.

In words, the triple constraint has four core elements:

- Projects must be within cost.
- Projects must be delivered on time.
- Projects must be within scope.
- Projects must meet customer quality requirements.

More recently, the project management triangle has given way to a project management diamond - with cost, time, scope and quality as the four vertices and customer expectations as a central theme .

No two customers have the same expectations. You must ask, explicitly, about each customer's expectations. If you don't know what those expectations are, you have no hope of meeting them.

Project Phases

A project goes through six phases during its lifecycle:

1. **Project Definition:** Defining the goals, objectives and critical success factors for the project
2. **Project Initiation:** Everything needed to set up the project before work can start
3. **Project Planning:** Detailed plans of how the work will be carried out, including time, cost and resource estimates
4. **Project Execution:** Doing the work to deliver the product, service or desired outcome
5. **Project Monitoring & Control:** Ensuring that a project stays on track and taking corrective action to ensure it does
6. **Project Closure:** Formal acceptance of the deliverables and disbanding of all the elements required to run the project

Project Manager's Role

The role of the project manager is one of great responsibility. The project manager's job is to direct, supervise and control the project from beginning to end. Project managers should not carry out project work - managing the project is enough. Here are some of the activities a project manager undertakes:

- The project manager must define the project, reduce it to a set of manageable tasks, obtain appropriate resources and build a team to perform the work.
- The project manager must set the final goal of the project and motivate the project team to complete the project on time.
- The project manager must inform all stakeholders of progress on a regular basis.

- The project manager must assess and monitor risks to the project and mitigate them.

No project ever goes quite as planned. Project managers must learn to adapt to and manage change.

Project Manager's Skill Set

A project manager must have a range of competencies:

- Leadership
- People management (customers, suppliers, functional managers and project team)
- Effective communication (verbal and written)
- Influencing
- Negotiation
- Conflict management
- Planning
- Contract management
- Estimating
- Problem solving
- Creative thinking
- Time management

Project managers bear ultimate responsibility for making things happen. Traditionally, they have carried out this role as mere implementers. To do their jobs they needed to have the necessary administrative and technical competencies.

Today they play a far broader role. In addition to the traditional skills, they need to have business skills, customer relations skills, and political skills.

Psychologically, they must be results-oriented self-starters with a high tolerance for ambiguity because little is clear-cut in today's tumultuous business environment. Shortcomings in any of these areas can lead to project failure.

— J. Davidson Frame

Barriers, Risks and Issues That Affect Project Success

Many things can go wrong in project management. Any barriers, risks and issues can affect every phase and process of project management. Here are just some of the things that can possibly go wrong:

- Poor communication
- Disagreement
- Misunderstandings
- Inclement weather

- Union strikes
- Personality conflicts
- Poor management
- Poorly defined goals and objectives

A good project management discipline will not eliminate all risks, issues and surprises - but it *will* provide standard processes and procedures to deal with them and help prevent the following:

- Projects finishing late, exceeding budget and not meeting customer expectations
- Inconsistency between the processes and procedures used by project managers, leading to the favouring of some project managers more than others
- Successful projects, despite a lack of planning, achieved through high stress levels, goodwill and significant amounts of overtime
- Project management being seen as not adding value and as a waste of time and money
- Unforeseen internal and external events impacting the project

In Summary

Project management is all about creating an environment and conditions in which to achieve a particular goal or objective - in a controlled manner with a team of people.

When you're familiar with what project management entails, from the process to mitigating all that can possibly (and often does) go wrong, you affect the end result - whether you're engaged in a project methodology for the first time or a seasoned pro.