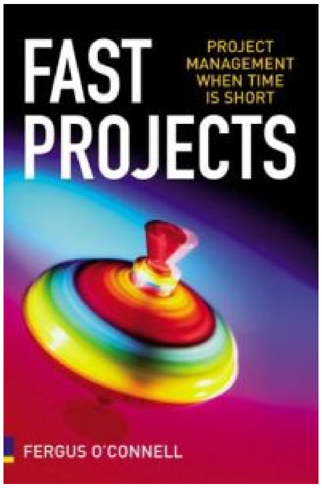


# Book Fast Projects

## Project Management When Time Is Short

Fergus O'Connell
Pearson Education Limited, 2009

---

## Recommendation

Why do so many grandiose projects fail so miserably? In 2001, Kmart canceled its supply chain management system after $130 million in project expenses. In 2004, Ford Motor Company retired its purchasing setup not long after spending $400 million to develop it. These projects from hell, alas, are not aberrations. Indeed, many projects become utter disasters, with missed deadlines, mangled goals and monster cost overruns. Thus the idea that you can bring your projects in under budget and ahead of schedule while meeting all your quality goals sounds absurdly naive. Not according to Fergus O'Connell, a delightfully witty Irish project management expert. His entertaining, easy-to-read, informative book shows you how to plan, execute and finish any project at top speed – and how to determine whether you should take it on in the first place. *BooksInShort* recommends O'Connell's efficient game plan to anyone with projects to complete.

## Take-Aways

- Many projects finish late, even though you can speed up any project.
- Never commit to project goals until you have analyzed and planned every step carefully.
- Nail down the specifics of every project goal with stakeholders.
- Establish and plan exactly what work you must accomplish; detail it by specific jobs.
- Make sure you have the right people.
- Conduct a formal risk analysis. As much as possible, know what you face at every turn.
- Always expect the unexpected. Have a contingency plan for every project.
- Fully explain your project plan to all stakeholders.
- If your project looks impossible, see if you can change its parameters.
- Many projects fail because they were never really possible in the first place.

## Summary

### "Say, 'We'll Take a Look at It'"

Far too many projects take much longer than anticipated, but they don't have to end up late. Projects you plan and execute systematically can come in on time or even ahead of schedule, within budget and at top quality. "Fast projects" are eminently doable if you refuse – from the start – to accept any stipulation (time, personnel, budget or some wild card) until you check every detail. That sounds simple, but many project managers blithely accept whatever demands project sponsors request and later repent amid great expense and delay.

> "If you're the project manager, you must do anything necessary to ensure that each and every job gets done."

Beware of the typical sponsor who tries to hand a project to you while saying something like, "We don't know much about this project, but it has to be done by this date...with the team you've got, and the budget is fixed." Such a statement is utterly unrealistic. Who else operates that way? Your auto mechanic would never agree to fix your car by an arbitrary date, for an arbitrary cost, without looking under the hood. Don't let any project sponsor shove a project and its specs down your throat. Failure to check the details carefully before starting is a recipe for project disaster.

## “The Goal of Your Project”

To speed up a project, you have to know what it must accomplish. To uncover a project’s goals, ask, “What event marks the end of this project?” Then list all the stakeholders and their “win-conditions” – the results they desire. Identify the project’s “end point,” the date when it will meet all these various win-conditions, as far as you can predict. Additionally, list all the project’s components. Every part of the project should be on your list. Anything missing is not part of the project. Differentiate between “have-to-have” and “nice-to-have” components. The list of haves is the project boundary that enables you to plan. Without such a list, you’re shooting in the dark. Thoroughly define the project based on exactly what the stakeholders want. If you don’t ascertain their wishes carefully, you’ll end up with unhappy stakeholders, and that means an unsuccessful project. Before you start, nail down a composite set of win-conditions that all stakeholders accept.

## “Figuring Out What Work Has to Be Done”

A project is a collection of jobs completed in sequence. Work with the members of your project team to list all the jobs a project will require; don’t try to do this alone. As your team identifies the main jobs, break them down into component tasks. Describe each job in increments of one to five days’ length or one to five “person-days of work.” If you lack some data, make an estimate based on reasonable assumptions. Using the job list, create a “work breakdown structure” (WBS). This vital calculation lets you establish the job’s parameters, including budget, assignments and schedules. Detail each specific job and any adjunct tasks it requires, and gauge each undertaking’s allotted work and time. Microsoft Project lets you portray your project graphically, but you may prefer a whiteboard or a flipchart. Use the simplest tool that works for you.

> “Nobody ever said that being a project manager was a popularity contest.”

Refer to your experience on previous assignments as you calculate the current job’s requirements. The more detailed information you have, the more accurately you can estimate. Measure work in person-hours or person-days. Sequence every step. Project management time should account for 10% of your total WBS, so if the project requires 500 person-days, project management will require 50 person-days. To speed up your project, further define the daily work breakdown for each job instead of using increments of up to five days. A “day-by-day, person-by-person plan” gives you maximum control and project definition.

## “Getting People to Do the Work”

Projects involve supply (funds, people, resources) and demand (time, budget, quality). To rush a project, keep a healthy balance between supply and demand. The right people are a pivotal resource for any project. List all the workers your project needs by name, and make sure they are available. Designate each specific person you want, and fill out that individual’s “dance card,” a chart showing his or her available dates during the span of the project. Failing to use dance cards is asking for trouble. You don’t want to learn after staffing and starting your project that Martin will be out of town for two weeks in June, or that Mary is due for 10 days of vacation.

> “Many project managers make the mistake of thinking that because they’ve made commitments, these commitments must hold in all circumstances.”

Try to hire superstars who love their jobs and have the appropriate capabilities and experience. The worst staffers are loose cannons who can’t handle the work. Of course, managing excellent employees is easier than managing substandard ones, so put the best people available on your team.

## “Making the Plan Bulletproof”

Always expect the unexpected. Surprises are a constant on every project, and they’re not fun. To allow for unexpected events, conduct a risk analysis. Identify any potential problem areas in the project to see if you can eliminate them, mitigate them or, at least, plan for them as best as you can. To carry out your risk analysis, grade each risk you can identify according to how likely it is to happen: Three denotes a high risk of occurring, two is medium and one is low. Then grade each risk according to its potential negative impact using a similar three-two-one scale, from the most harmful to the least. Multiply each risk’s two scores; for example, three times three is nine – the worst score. Consider how to reduce each risk and how to identify its warning signs.

> “The more contingency you have in the plan, the greater the likelihood that the commitments you make to stakeholders will come true.”

Add a contingency allotment of 10% to 15% above your total planned work hours before you commit to a deadline. Without this, any change will put you in a hole. To climb out, you’ll need to generate more resources or keep your people on duty longer. It still might not work. To give yourself a buffer, add contingency hours that extend your end date.

## “Selling the Plan”

Now that you have fully developed your project plan, you must explain it and sell it to the project’s stakeholders to secure the buy-in you need. When you detail everything in advance, your stakeholders see what they should expect from the project and what you expect from them to ensure its success. Your job goes beyond managing the project; you also must manage stakeholders’ expectations. Keeping them happy is your best path to a successful project.

> “There is always a price associated with every change of mind.”

The communication and selling process is crucial on any project, and it is vital for one you want to hasten. Misunderstandings can slow a project. Fully communicate with any stakeholders who could interfere with the project’s progress. Before you start the project, explain everything in two meetings. First, meet with your senior executives and other “external stakeholders.” Then meet with your project team. Distribute the plan at each session. Discuss the big picture and then go into all the necessary details. Show your contingencies and risk analysis. Answer any questions.

## “What to Do If the Project Is Impossible”

Stakeholders' unreasonable demands can set projects up for failure. Added baggage can wreck your schedule and undermine your goals. A sound project plan is the best way to deal with potentially impossible projects. The plan should detail the project's steps, timeline and specific jobs. It should cover quality issues, budget and necessary resources. With a good plan as your logical guide, you will see if your project is becoming impossible. If so, move to cut back on the project's scope and concentrate only on the have-to-have items.

> "Project management is about predicting the future."

When your goal is to transform the impossible into the possible, see if you can change any of the project's conditions, specs or parameters. Examine the completion dates to see if, perhaps, you can buy more time. If a deadline falls on a Saturday or Sunday, or on a date during the extended Christmas holiday period, it may be changeable. Ask if the stakeholders built contingencies into their requested time frame; if so, perhaps you can finish the project a few weeks later than you initially planned and still wrap up within their deadline. Adding people to an impossible project may be self-defeating, though it could help if you can quickly plug in seasoned experts who can contribute immediately. Given impossible parameters, try to reduce your quality assurance requirements or to shorten the process for obtaining sponsor sign-offs. If the stakeholders permit any or all of these changes, you could transform an impossible project into a possible one. Use your fact-based plan to prove that stakeholders' baggage – if unchanged – will prevent your team from meeting the desired goals.

### "Executing the Plan"

Quality project management hinges on the three components of successful execution: managing your people, tracking your plan's milestones and communicating status reports to your stakeholders. Review your plan first thing each morning as you manage your project. Focus on the tasks that involve you immediately, on that day. Place these jobs on your daily to-do plan, and record when you complete them. Analyze the significance of any unexpected events. Do you need to use your contingency plans to deal with them? Do they affect your agenda, deadline or budget? Make a note of any incidents, and communicate any needed changes or negative project trends to your stakeholders.

### Predicting Success

To evaluate any project in advance in minutes, score it using the "probability of success indicator." Grade each project element using the following maximum scores: goal definition (up to 20), precise jobs to-do list including time spans (20), project management (10), project personnel and availability (10), alternative plan for contingencies (5), completion of risk overview (5), flexible management (10), daily progress monitoring (10) and weekly status reporting (10). After you assign scores to each element, add them up; the best grade is 100. A low score shows a project in trouble; a high score equals a project on the way to success.

> "Postmortems tend to focus on what was done badly."

Using the right system, you can plan a project and its scope in just one day. Set up a daylong meeting with everyone who will determine the project's range. Include anyone involved in planning the project. Strategize the meeting carefully so you secure all the input you need to set out the project's entire design.

> "Adding people to a late project makes it later." (Brooks's Law)

Whether you plan your project in a day or a year, you still have to look out for the mistakes that could make it fail. Projects crash as a result of 12 common errors:

1. **"The project was never actually possible"** – Project managers are far too open to taking on projects without probing how realistic their goals really are.
2. **"The goal of the project was not defined properly"** – Shortly after the London Stock Exchange's Taurus project collapsed, its leader admitted, "We were testing parts of the system while other parts had not been designed or built." Clearly, that is a recipe for doom.
3. **Project changes were out of control** – Unplanned changes undermine your goals and eat away at the contingency. If you have no contingency, you're in the weeds.
4. **Stakeholders did not identify their win-conditions** – You can't make your project sponsors happy if you don't know what they want.
5. **The plan was good, but the project never got the needed resources** – A nonstarter.
6. **The project had no contingency plans** – Unless you can foretell the future, you must add contingencies to your project parameters.
7. **The project suffered from poor planning** – A project plan must sequentially tie together all the individual jobs that make up the mission. If it doesn't, managers must deal with these jobs on the fly, or just hope for the best (good luck with that).
8. **"The project wasn't led properly"** – As project manager, you are responsible for all your employees' activities. Moreover, you are also responsible for – and your project's success also depends on – the activities of people whom you do not control.
9. **Project participants' expectations ran amok** – Stakeholders who do not do the actual work to make your project succeed could have thoroughly unrealistic expectations about it. Accede to those dreams at your peril.
10. **The project's planned milestones were not monitored** – Projects can quickly get off course if you do not actively track and check them.
11. **"Project reporting was inadequate or nonexistent"** – Insist on meaningful data in all status reports.
12. **Participants thought project problems had simple solutions** – People may decide that they can rescue a failing project if everyone just works more hours, or if sponsors extend the deadline or increase the resources. No, no and no. Projects fail because of poor planning. If problems develop, assess reality and plan again.

## About the Author

**Fergus O'Connell** founded ETP, Ireland's largest project management company.

---