

## Chapter 1

# Project Management: The Key to Achieving Results

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding what makes a project a project
  - ▶ Seeing what's involved in project management
  - ▶ Coming to grips with the Project Manager's role
  - ▶ Knowing what it takes to be a successful Project Manager
- 

Organisations are constantly changing, and ever faster, as they adapt to new market conditions, new financial conditions, new business practices, new legal requirements and new technology. Running projects often creates the change, and as a result businesses are increasingly driven to find individuals who can excel in this project-oriented environment.

## *Taking on a Project*

Because you're reading this book, the chances are that you've been asked to manage a project for the first time or that you're already running projects and are looking to see whether you can find easier and better ways of doing things. If the project is indeed your first one, that's a challenge and may well give you the chance to excel in something you haven't done before; for many, managing a project even opens a door to a new career. Try not to think of project management as a career death threat, even if others do and they now avoid looking you in the eye when passing you in the corridor. The really good news here, whether you're completely new or have some experience, is that project management has been around for a very long time. In that time, Project Managers have come up with highly effective strategies and a range of very practical techniques. You can benefit from all that experience, and this book takes you through all you need to know.

So, hang on tight – you're going to need an effective set of skills and techniques to steer your projects to successful completion. This chapter gets you

off to a great start by showing you what projects and project management really are and by helping you separate projects from non-project assignments. The chapter also offers some insight on why projects succeed or fail and starts to get you into the project management mindset.

## Avoiding the Pitfalls

By following a sound approach to the project, you automatically avoid many of the pitfalls that continue to contribute to, or cause, project failure on a mind-boggling scale. You may ask why, if good ways of doing things exist, people ignore them and then have their projects fail. Good question. People make the same project mistakes repeatedly, and they're largely avoidable. You may have come across the joke by comedian Tommy Cooper:

*I went to the doctor and said 'Every time I do this, it hurts.'*  
*The doctor said, 'Well, don't do it then.'*



A national public project run in the UK to create a database of offenders for use by the Prison Service, Probation Service and others has attracted heavy criticism for poor management. The National Audit Office, which checks up on government departments, investigated and reported that the project was delayed by three years, and the budget was double the original, but the scope had been radically cut back. Edward Leigh MP, chairman of the powerful Public Accounts Committee in Parliament described the scheme as a 'spectacular failure' and 'a master-class in sloppy project management'.

The following list takes a quick look at the main causes of project failure (we address each of these causes in later chapters in the book). The list makes for depressing reading, particularly if you recognise some elements in parts of your own organisation. Nevertheless, the list gives a good background against which to contrast successful project management and the approach and techniques that we set down in this book.

- ✓ **Lack of clear objectives:** Nobody's really sure what the project is about, much less are people agreed on it.
- ✓ **Lack of risk management:** Things go wrong that someone could easily have foreseen and then controlled to some degree or even prevented.
- ✓ **No senior management 'buy in':** Senior managers were never convinced and so never supported the project, leading to problems such as lack of resource. Neither did those managers exercise normal management supervision as they routinely do in their other areas of responsibility.
- ✓ **Poor planning:** Actually, that's being kind, because often the problem is that no planning was done at all. It's not surprising, then, when things run out of control, and not least because nobody knows where the project should be at this point anyway.

- ✔ **No clear progress milestones:** This follows on from poor planning. The lack of milestones means nobody sees when things are off track, and problems go unnoticed for a long time.
- ✔ **Understated scope:** The scope and the Project Plan are superficial and understate both what the project needs to deliver and the resource needed to deliver it. Project staff (often team members) then discover the hidden but essential components later in the project. The additional work that is necessary then takes the project out of control, causing delay to the original schedule and overspending against the original budget.
- ✔ **Poor communications:** So many projects fail because of communication breakdown, which can stem from unclear roles and responsibilities and from poor senior management attitudes, such as not wanting to hear bad news.
- ✔ **Unrealistic resource levels:** It just isn't possible to do a project of the required scope with such a small amount of resource – staff, money or both.
- ✔ **Unrealistic timescales:** The project just can't deliver by the required time, so it's doomed to failure.
- ✔ **No change control:** People add in things bit by bit – scope creep. Then it dawns on everyone that the project's grown so big that it can't be delivered within the fixed budget or by the set deadline.

That's ten reasons for failure, but you can probably think of a few more. The interesting thing about these problems is that avoiding them is, for the most part, actually not that difficult.

## *Deciding Whether the Job Is Really a Project*

Before you start to think too deeply about how to set up the project, the first thing to do is check whether it really is one. No matter what your job is, you handle a myriad of assignments every day: prepare a memo, hold a meeting, design a sales campaign or move to new offices. Not all these assignments are projects. So what makes something a project?

You can consider three easy areas to determine whether a job is a project:

- ✔ Is it a one-off job or something that's ongoing? If the job is ongoing, like producing bars of soap on a production line or taking customer orders, then it's business as usual, not a project.
- ✔ Does the job justify project controls? Project management means incurring some overheads, although in this book we offer advice on how to

keep overheads to the minimum. But the fact remains that overheads exist and some jobs are so small or straightforward that they just don't justify that degree of control.

- ✓ This last one may sound a little weird, and it certainly doesn't fit with the formal definitions; it's the question, 'Do you want to handle the job as a project?' You may choose to deal with a block of work as a project, but I wouldn't – so, in some instances, you have a choice.

## Understanding the four control areas

Different project approaches have slightly different definitions of a project; here's one:



A *project* is a temporary undertaking performed to produce a unique product, service or result.

The 'unique product' is true, but don't let that put you off setting up projects that are effectively repeated, such as organising the annual company conference. Although, strictly speaking, the task is unique each time, you will nevertheless find large areas of commonality with previous projects, and you don't need to go and reinvent the wheel. For example, you can probably adapt last year's plans rather than starting from scratch.

Large or small, projects involve the following four areas of control:

- ✓ **Scope:** What the project will deliver
- ✓ **Time:** When the project will deliver
- ✓ **Quality:** So often forgotten, but an essential dimension
- ✓ **Resource:** Necessary amounts of people, funds and other resources such as equipment and accommodation that the project needs

You need to balance these areas for each project, and you can see immediately why so many projects get into difficulties. You look at a project, think about the four control factors and say to yourself, 'They want that scope, to that quality level, with just that resource and by then? They've got to be joking!' Strangely, organisational managers often commit projects to failure by insisting on unachievable deadlines or unrealistic resources. What's even stranger is that those same managers are surprised and even angry when the projects inevitably get into difficulties and fail.

Getting the balance right in the early part of the project when you do the main scoping and planning is, obviously enough, essential. Jerry Madden of NASA, the American space agency, produced a great document called 'One Hundred Rules for NASA Project Managers'. Rule 15 is:

*The seeds of problems are laid down early. Initial planning is the most vital part of a project. The review of most failed projects or project problems indicate the disasters were well planned to happen from the start.*

It's also useful to think about the four areas of control when dealing with change in the project. Chapter 14 includes a 'four dog' model to help you think about the interdependences. Although many other considerations may affect a project's performance, these four components are the basis of a project's definition for the following reasons:

- ✓ The only reason a project exists is to produce the results specified in its scope.
- ✓ The project's end date is usually an essential part of defining what constitutes successful performance – in many cases, the project must provide the desired result by a certain time to meet its intended need.
- ✓ The quality requirement is a vital part of the balance and may be the most important element, even though many organisational managers are preoccupied with time and cost. But what's the point of delivering an unusable heap of garbage on time and within budget?
- ✓ The availability of resources can affect which products the project can produce and the timescale in which it can produce them.



Quality can be a very important factor, and is sometimes the most important, so do think about it carefully. A project to build and install a new air traffic control system for the south of the UK was criticised for being over budget and late on delivery. As a number of people have pointed out, though, if you're sitting in an aeroplane circling while waiting to land at London Heathrow Airport – one of the world's busiest – would you rather that they'd got the air traffic control system in on time and to budget or that they'd got it right?

## *Recognising the diversity of projects*

Projects come in a wide assortment of shapes and sizes. For example, projects can:

- ✓ **Be large or small:**
  - Building a new railway link across London, which will cost around £16 billion and take seven years to complete, is a project, perhaps linked to other projects to form a programme.
  - Preparing the annual report for the department, which may take you six days to complete, may also be a project.
- ✓ **Involve many people or just you:**
  - Training all 10,000 of your organisation's sales staff worldwide in the working of a new product is a project.

- Redecorating an office and rearranging the furniture and equipment is also a project.

✓ **Be defined by a legal contract or by an informal agreement:**

- A signed contract between you and a customer that requires you to build a house defines a project.
- An informal agreement by the IT department to install a new software package in a business area defines a project.

✓ **Be business related or personal:**

- Conducting your organisation's five-yearly strategy review is a project.
- Preparing for a family wedding is also a project – and a much more pleasant one than the five-yearly strategy review.



No matter what the individual characteristics of your project are, you can use the same four elements of scope, time, quality and resource to think it through.

## A project by any other name – just isn't a project

People often confuse the following two terms with *project*:

- ✓ **Process:** A *process* is a series of routine steps to perform a particular function, such as a procurement process or a budget process. A process isn't a one-time activity that achieves a specific result; instead, it defines *how* you do a particular function every time. Processes such as the activities that go into buying materials are often parts of projects.
- ✓ **Programme:** This term can describe two different situations. First, a *programme* can be a set of goals that gives rise to specific projects, but, unlike a project, you can never

accomplish this sort of programme completely. For example, a health-awareness programme can never completely achieve its goal (the public will never be totally aware of all health issues as a result of a health-awareness programme). More commonly, though, a *programme* (sometimes controlled with programme management) is a set of projects that need to be coordinated in some way. Perhaps it's a strategic programme to change the whole way the organisation works, or perhaps it's a group of projects with significant interdependencies that all need to be managed to finish at the same time. See Chapter 17 for more on programmes.

## *Understanding the four stages of a project*

Every project, whether large or small, passes through four stages:

- ✔ **Starting the Project:** This stage involves generating, evaluating and framing the business need for the project and the general approach to performing it, and agreeing to prepare a detailed Project Plan. Outputs from this stage may include approval to proceed to the next stage, documentation of the need for the project, and rough estimates of time and resources to perform it, and an initial list of people who may be interested in, involved with or affected by the project.
- ✔ **Organising and Preparing:** This stage involves developing a plan that specifies the desired results: the work to do; the time, the cost and other resources required; and a plan for how to address key project risks. Outputs from this stage include a Project Plan documenting the intended project results and the time, resources and supporting processes to help create them, along with all the other controls that the project needs, such as for risk management.
- ✔ **Carrying Out the Work:** This stage involves performing the planned work, monitoring and controlling performance to ensure adherence to the current plan, and doing the more detailed planning of successive phases as the project continues. Outputs from this stage may include project progress reports, financial reports and further detailed plans.
- ✔ **Closing the Project:** This stage involves assessing the project results, obtaining customer approvals, assigning project team members to new work, closing financial accounts and conducting a post-project evaluation. Outputs from this stage may include final, accepted and approved project results and recommendations and suggestions for applying lessons learned from this project to similar efforts in the future.

For small projects, this entire life-cycle can take a few days. For larger projects, it can take years! Chapter 2 goes through these stages – the life of your project – in more detail so you can see exactly what you need to be doing and when.



In a perfect world, projects run smoothly and always go exactly to plan. However, because you don't live in a perfect world and because your project certainly won't be running in one, you need to be flexible. When starting to think about your project, you need to allow for:

- ✔ **The unknown and uncertain:** Projects are rarely 100 per cent predictable. The normal territory of projects is that, to some extent at least, you're going into the unknown. Therefore, your plans need to allow for things going off track. Sometimes the uncertain areas are predictable, which falls partly into the area of risk management (see Chapter 10 for how to assess and manage risks). Sometimes the areas aren't at all predictable, and that comes into the area of contingency. You need contingency; remember Murphy's Law – 'If it can go wrong, it will go wrong.' We talk about contingency in Chapter 10.

- ✓ **Learning by doing:** Despite doing your best to assess feasibility and develop good plans at the front end of the project, you may find later on that you can't achieve what you thought you could or in the way you thought you could. When this situation happens, you need to rethink in the light of the new information you've acquired. Sometimes you can see up front that you won't know how a particular part of the project is going to work out until you get nearer to that point and better information is to hand. Don't worry about that; just point it out clearly at the beginning.
- ✓ **Unexpected change:** Your initial feasibility and benefits assessments are sound, and your plan is detailed and realistic. However, certain key project team members leave the organisation without warning during the project. Or a new technology emerges, and it's more appropriate to use than the one in your original plans. Perhaps the business environment changes and with it your organisation's whole market strategy. Because ignoring these occurrences may seriously jeopardise your project's success, you need to rethink and re-plan in light of these new realities.

## Defining the Project Manager's Role

The Project Manager's job is to manage the project on a day-to-day basis to bring it to a successful conclusion. He'll usually be accountable to a senior manager who's the project sponsor, or to a small group of managers who form a project steering committee or project board. The Project Manager's job is challenging. For instance, he often coordinates technically specialised professionals – who may have limited experience working together – to achieve a common goal.



It's important to understand that the Project Manager's position is indeed a role; it's not about status. That's true of all roles in the project and there may, for example, be very senior people working as team members (such as chief engineers and legal advisers) who are accountable to the Project Manager even though in the normal business they're very much his senior. Both team members and the Project Manager himself must understand that he has responsibility and authority in the project that comes with the role, independent of his organisational grade or rank. When the Project Manager has a clear accountability to a sponsor or steering committee, life is much easier because everyone can see that his authority comes from them. It's the same mechanism that allows a corporal on the gate of a military camp to refuse entry to a general until he's satisfied that the general's security pass is valid.

The Project Manager doesn't do any of the technical work of the project in his role as Project Manager. If he's involved in technical work it's with a different hat on – that of a team member. The distinction is important because if you're doing teamwork as well as project managing, you must be clear about both roles and only wear one hat at a time. It's all too easy to neglect

the management and let the project run out of control because you're so engrossed in the detail and challenges of your part of the technical work.

The Project Manager's role requires hard skills such as planning and costing, but also soft people skills, and his success requires a keen ability to identify and resolve sensitive organisational and interpersonal issues. The next section covers the main tasks that a Project Manager handles and notes potential challenges that he may encounter.

## *Looking at the Project Manager's tasks*

Your role as the Project Manager is one of day-to-day responsibility for the project, and that might involve so much work that your job must necessarily be a full-time one. Or it may be that the project is smaller and less complicated and project management is just part of your job. Either way, the responsibilities are the same; it's just the scale and complexity that are different.

Here's a summary of the main tasks. Some things on the list involve consultation with others:

- ✓ Sketch out initial ideas for the project, with the justification, outline costs and timescales.
- ✓ Plan the project, including mapping out the controls that will be put in place, defining what quality the project needs and how it will be achieved, analysing risk and planning control actions.
- ✓ Control the flow of work to teams (or perhaps just team members in a smaller project).
- ✓ Motivate and support teams and team members.
- ✓ Liaise with external suppliers.
- ✓ Liaise with Project Managers of interfacing projects.
- ✓ Liaise with programme management staff if the project is one of a group of projects being coordinated as a programme.
- ✓ Ensure that the project deliverables are developed to the right level of quality.
- ✓ Keep track of progress and adjust to correct any minor drifts off the plan.
- ✓ Keep track of spending.
- ✓ Go to others, such as the steering committee, if things go more significantly off track (for example, the whole project is threatened).
- ✓ Report progress, such as to the sponsor or steering committee.
- ✓ Keep track of risks and make sure that control actions are taken.
- ✓ Deal with any problems, involving others as necessary.

- ✔ Decide on changes, getting approval from others where the Project Manager doesn't have personal authority to make a decision (for example, when changes involve very high cost).
- ✔ Plan successive delivery stages in more detail.
- ✔ Close the project down in an orderly way when everything's done.

So, the tasks will keep you very busy but also be very enjoyable if you're a Project Manager at heart.



A key to project success is being proactive. Get out in front of the project and direct where it's going. Don't follow on behind the project being reactive and having to fire-fight countless problems because you didn't see them coming.

## *Staving off potential excuses for not following a structured project management approach*

Be prepared for other people to oppose your attempts to use proven project management approaches. The following list provides a few examples of excuses you may encounter as a Project Manager and the appropriate responses you can give:

- ✔ **Excuse:** Our projects are all to short deadlines; we have no time to plan.  
**Response:** Unfortunately for the excuse giver, this logic is illogical! With a short deadline, you can't afford to make many mistakes. If it doesn't matter too much when the project delivers, you don't need as good a plan as if it matters very much and time is short.
- ✔ **Excuse:** Structured project management is only for large projects.  
**Response:** No matter what size the project is, the information you need to perform it is the same. What do you need to produce? What work has to be done? Who's going to do it? When will the project end? Have you met expectations?
- ✔ **Excuse:** Project management just means more overheads.  
**Response:** So does corporate management, and that's essential too! But in any case, if you don't manage a project properly and it fails, how much will that cost you in wasted time, money and lost benefits?
- ✔ **Excuse:** These projects require creativity and new development. You can't predict their outcomes with any certainty.  
**Response:** You can predict some projects' outcomes better than others. However, people awaiting the outcomes of any project still have expectations for what they'll get and when. Therefore, a project with many uncertainties needs a manager to develop and share initial plans and then to assess and communicate the effects of unexpected occurrences.

## Avoiding 'shortcuts'

The short-term pressures of your job, particularly if you're fitting in project management alongside other work, may tempt you to cut corners and miss things out. That's not the same as adjusting the project management needs to the project, but rather missing stuff out altogether that in an ideal world you would have done. Resist the temptation to cut corners, because usually doing so comes back and bites you later.



Don't be seduced into seemingly easier shortcuts such as:

- ✓ **Jumping directly from Starting the Project to Carrying Out the Work:** Sounds good, but you haven't defined the work to be done! A variation on this shortcut is: 'This project's been done before, so why plan it out again?' Even though projects can be similar to past ones, some elements will be different. Always check the plan thoroughly.
- ✓ **Failing to check progress at frequent intervals:** After all, everyone's working hard and things seem to be going okay. But just as when you're walking somewhere you need to check the map from time to time, so you need to check the project. Otherwise you won't see warning signs and may be a long way off track by the time you do eventually notice that something is wrong.
- ✓ **Not keeping the plan up to date:** That includes logging *actuals* such as the time actually taken to do things and the expense actually incurred. Yes, it takes discipline to stay up to date, but you'll never be able to control the project if you don't know where you are at the moment.
- ✓ **Not completing the closing stage:** At the end of one project, you can face pressure to move right on to the next. Scarce resources and short deadlines encourage this rapid movement, and starting a new project is always more challenging than wrapping up an old one. But you must make sure that everything is properly finished and, if necessary, handed over. You also need to check that the project has achieved what it's supposed to have done and that you and your organisation take on board any lessons, good and bad, for the future.

## Do You Have What It Takes?

You're reading this book because you want to be a good Project Manager, right? Well, try a quick quiz to see what your strengths and weaknesses are.

## *Questions*

1. Do you prefer to be everyone's friend or get the job done?
2. Do you prefer to do technical work or manage technical work?
3. Do you think the best way to get a tough task done is to do it yourself?
4. Do you prefer your work to be predictable or constantly changing?
5. Do you get immersed in the detail or can you hold on to the big picture?
6. Do you handle pressure well?
7. Do you like to plan and organise the work of others?
8. Do you think you shouldn't have to monitor people after they've said they'll do a job for you?
9. Do you see a need to motivate people, or do you leave them to get on with it because they should be self-motivated to perform their jobs?
10. Are you comfortable dealing with people at all organisational levels?

## *Answers*

1. Good working relations are vital, but you must also deliver the goods.
2. Management is exactly that, and you move away from hands-on stuff.
3. Your role is to manage, and that includes letting others develop.
4. No project ever goes exactly to plan and, anyway, things change. That's part of the challenge and also the buzz of project management.
5. You may need to deal with fine detail, but not at the expense of losing the big picture.
6. The Project Manager needs a cool head; some times will be pressured.
7. Being an organiser and planner goes with the territory.
8. Just like with general management, you have to know that work is getting done.
9. You need soft people skills too. Projects are about people.
10. The Project Manager must deal with people at all levels – from upper management to support staff – who perform project-related activities.