

S U N D A Y

Today we will look at the nature of a project and what distinguishes it from other forms of activity.

The nature of the project

- Distinguishing characteristics
- A typical project life cycle
- The role of the Project Manager
- The benefits of a systematic approach

Before we can look at Project Management in any detail, we should understand what a project is and why Project Management is different from *routine* management activities.

To be given responsibility for a project can seem a daunting prospect. All too often your brief will have been given on a half page memorandum, or is the resolution of a committee meeting. It is for you to turn this into something concrete, something which is readily identifiable and, more to the point, something which is under your control.



SUNDAY

The nature of a project

The most obvious characteristic of a project is that it has to achieve some particular purpose, and this is normally indicated in the project's name: The Channel Tunnel Project, the Airbus Project, the Canary Wharf Project, etc. This distinguishes it from routine activities which are part of an organisation's normal business, such as running the payroll, editing a daily newspaper or producing another ten thousand tins of beans.

We will discuss aims and objectives of projects as a particular subject later this week but for the time being it is probably most useful to think of a project as *an instrument of change*.

When the project is successfully completed it will have an impact on people's lives, by changing their working patterns or by changing their environment. Managing change is clearly different (and at times much harder) than managing the status quo and it is for this reason that projects are established to effect such change in a controlled manner.

Projects can vary hugely both in their subject and in their size. A project can range from putting someone onto the moon, to selecting a new coffee machine for the office. Projects exist in all sorts of different types of business, such as information systems, construction, finance, marketing, industrial research and local government.

Moreover, no two projects are the same. A project to develop this year's model family saloon may look suspiciously like last year's, but its objectives will be

S U N D A Y

different, the circumstances will have changed and it will involve different people.

The main characteristics of a project are that it:

Main characteristics of a project

- Is an instrument of change
- Has a clearly identifiable start and finish
- Has a specific aim
- Results in something being delivered
- Is unique
- Is the responsibility of a single person or body
- Involves cost, resources and time
- Uses a wide variety of resources and skills

All of these characteristics will not necessarily be obvious when a project is initiated. We may know the specific aim, but we will be aware of hidden agendas. Even if we have been given a budget and a deadline, we may still have little idea of the real cost, resource and time considerations of the project. All of these will have to be verified during the early part of the project.

Perhaps the only thing that the Project Manager can be sure of is that it is his/her responsibility and he/she will be judged by its success or failure.

A typical project life cycle

To help us apply some form of structure to the project, it is useful to think of all projects as having the same basic underlying structure. Whatever the project, it will pass through a number of distinct phases.

SUNDAY



The nature of these phases will, of course, vary depending on the type of project. So too will the time taken to go through them, from minutes to years.

Typically, a project will begin as the result of a report or feasibility study. (The work to undertake the feasibility study may well itself have been run as an individual project.)

The feasibility study will have defined the problem which is being addressed (such as 'It takes too long to cross the Channel', or 'we cannot reconcile our month-end figures until six weeks after month-end'). It may have investigated what the real requirements are (e.g. 'We need to be able to cross the Channel in less than one hour'). It will have evaluated alternative solutions and recommended a course of action.

The remaining phases of the project are as follows:

Typical project phases

- Initiation
- Specification
- Design
- Build
- Installation/implementation
- Operation and review

S U N D A Y

Initiation

Initiation is the most important phase of any project. Unless it is carried out effectively, the project stands little chance of success.

Initiation covers such areas as defining the terms of reference, setting objectives, agreeing budgets and gaining project approval. We will discuss this in more detail tomorrow, but it is enough to say here that the initiation of a project represents its very foundation. The manner in which it is conducted will set the tone for the remainder of the project.

It can also be the most intense period for the Project Manager, and much of this book is devoted to the activities inherent in it.

Specification

Specification is the phase of a project where the detailed requirements are determined. It is a time when you will be in close contact with the ultimate users of the project deliverable.

The project team will be analysing the users' requirements in detail and these will be documented by a Requirements Specification, which will be signed-off by the user. This will form the definitive scope of the remainder of the project.

It is at this point that the user tells you in precise terms what he/she wants you to deliver. It is important to note, however, that at this stage we are only concerned with the 'what' and not with the 'how'. Here the user will say that he/she needs to be able to get a container from London to Paris in four hours; it is not until the Design phase that you start talking about tunnels and bridges, lorries and trains.

S U N D A Y

Because you have a clearer idea of what the project involves, you will also have a better idea of what the costs and time considerations are likely to be. Typically, you will return to the project sponsor – with more detailed information and more detailed plans – to seek approval to proceed further.



Design

It is at the *design* phase that the 'what' is translated into the 'how'. Gradually, the final deliverable is beginning to take shape. Armed with the agreed requirements, the technical experts – architects, systems analysts, engineers, physicists – will create a solution for the problem which had been expressed.

This design forms the blueprint for the next phase. It may come in a variety of forms; diagrammatic plans, a working model, a prototype, or a detailed specification.

As in the previous phase, the design is agreed with the user and more detailed plans are developed for the next phase.

S U N D A Y

Build

Finally something tangible is created: the tunnel is dug, the building erected, or the system built. The *build* phase is the period which is awaited with the most impatience. There will always be a temptation to skimp on initiation, specification and design, merely to be seen to be producing something. *This is a temptation to be resisted.*

Implementation

The product has been designed and built and is now almost ready to be put into operation. Although we will have continually verified that what we're building is what the user actually asked for, a final acceptance process will take place during this phase.

Here we will also apply any transition procedures which need to be effected. Remember, project management is about the management of change. It is all very well developing lead-free petrol, but cars have to be modified, customers educated and prices set.

Operation

The operation phase is often overlooked as not being part of the project itself. It should not, however, be neglected. Once we are satisfied that the product works, that the ship didn't sink when the bottle of champagne struck its bow, then the project is over. As in the case of all the previous phases something is delivered: a final report which details the findings of a post implementation review.

Once your new product has been in use for a while – and probably not a very long while at that – new problems and requirements will emerge, and the whole cycle will begin again.

S U N D A Y

The role of the Project Manager

The role of a manager, any manager, is well understood to be as follows:

The role of the manager:

- To plan
- To organise
- To co-ordinate
- To control
- To lead

All this is equally applicable to a Project Manager. The distinction, however, is that he/she is fulfilling these roles in order to bring about change and not to preserve the status quo.

Planning, organisation, co-ordination and control outside of a project environment such as managing a department which operates in a functional role (e.g. sales, production or accounts) are frequently constrained by the process itself, by the activities of other departments, or by conflicting demands within the department.

Although no less true for project management, there is a shift of emphasis in which the above roles are all tightly focused on achieving the project's aim, and that the project is closely allied with the business objectives of the organisation.

A large part of this effort will manifest itself in the role of *communicator*.

S U N D A Y

Gaining and maintaining sponsorship

Project failure is frequently attributed to shortcomings in communication and involvement at senior levels in the organisation. Consider a breakfast of bacon and eggs (vegetarians notwithstanding); the chicken is just involved, but the pig is really committed. You need a pig as your sponsor; someone to champion your project with real passion!

Your project is likely to be competing for management attention with a number of other projects and activities within the organisation. An influential senior manager who will champion both you and your project will ensure that you receive appropriate senior management support. In this way, when you need decisions to be made, approvals to be granted, or resources to be made available, your project will not always be bottom of the agenda.

Particularly in dynamic and rapidly changing organisations, it is easy for the world to move faster than your project. Whilst your project may have been flavour of the month when it was initiated, it may no longer be so a year later – even if the need for it genuinely remains the same – as newer and more exciting projects appear.



S U N D A Y

Advertising the project

This is very closely related to gaining sponsorship, but applies to all levels of the organisation. The Project Manager has a responsibility to ensure that the credibility of his/her project is maintained at all times, and that the project maintains a high profile within the organisation throughout its lifetime.

The Project Manager is likely to be the main link between the project team and the outside world, and it is important that he/she makes a point of promoting the project.

Managing user expectations

It is inevitable on large projects – particularly long ones – that the users' perceptions of what you are going to deliver will differ from your own understanding. Regular reviews and control checkpoints (particularly at the end of each phase) will go a long way to avoiding this.

User expectations can vary enormously from complete cynicism to wild over-optimism about the way in which their lives will be enhanced when the project delivers.

It is vital to the success of the project that these excesses are curtailed. Users should be involved in all aspects of the project so that a relationship can be built that allows effective two-way communication.

Remember, in the end it is the users' reaction to what you deliver that is the prime determinant of whether your project was a success or failure.

S U N D A Y

A systematic approach

Having described projects as being fundamentally unique, varying in size, shape, time, cost and resources, it may seem odd that we should attempt to describe a standard project management approach which is universally applicable. But it is because of this variety that a systematic approach is necessary.

Benefits of a systematic approach

- It ensures that the product which the project is to deliver is clearly defined and understood by all parties
- It enables the objectives of the project to be clearly defined and closely allied to the business objectives of the organisation
- It allows responsibilities for different parts of the project to be understood, allocated and agreed
- It promotes a logical approach to planning and encourages more accurate estimating
- It provides a consistent means by which monitoring and control can be effected
- It reassures senior management by demonstrating visible control