

When does a project actually start? — Part 2

A serious gap in our typical project management methodology

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Introduction

Last month, in Part 1 of this paper, I set out my concern and some of the background to the issue and content of a project's so-called "Front End". In this Part 2, it seems to me to be not unreasonable to ask the question: "Front end of what?" and then to seek a better understanding of what this so-called front-end actually involves. Perhaps then we can discover the answer to our question: *When does a project actually start?*

At the same time, I believe it uncovers a serious and vitally important gap in the typical portrayal of current project management methodology.

Essentially, this is because of a failure to properly understand the role of the "Project Life Span" – or "Cycle" if you must,¹ and its influence on the ultimate success of any given project. As noted in Part 1 of this paper, in our search for a description covering starting a project, we found upward of 40 varying definitions of the word project and while some did mention the start of a project, none exactly defined it.²

In the light of this diversity of definitions representing the term "project", scholarly project management organizations around the world like to define the meaning of "project" in the simplest possible terms.³ That is to say:

- Project – A temporary endeavor created to produce agreed deliverables;⁴
- Project – A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result.⁵

In other words, the very complex nature of a project in real life is carefully avoided to the point that the resulting definition is almost meaningless. Indeed, there is no mention of the importance of the project start and finish, and not to mention things like prerequisite Business Cases, or Charters, and the elements of time and cost that require some form of approvals from those in authority.

Front end of what?

In Part 1 of this paper, we introduced Figure 1 that clearly showed a Project Life Cycle spanning in five phases from "Initiating" to "Closing", all preceded by a set of "Pre-project activities", see Figure 4.

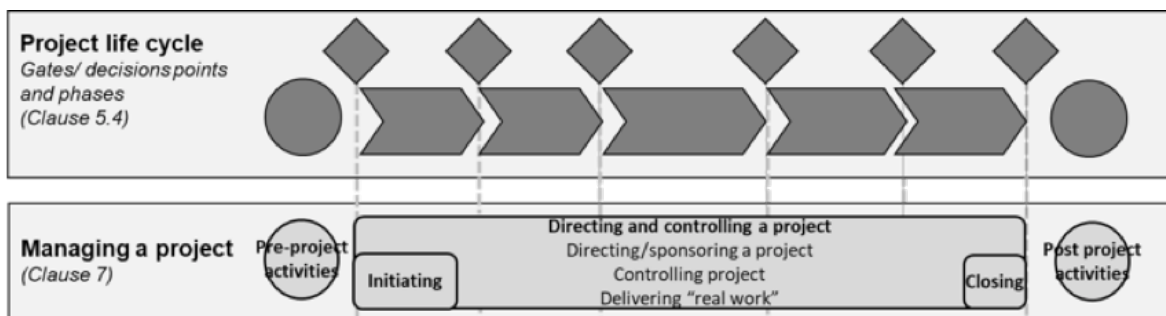


Figure 4: Pre- and post-project activities attached to the Project life cycle

Amongst the project management literature at large, we do find extensive discussion of a "Front End"

referred to as "Pre-project" or "Study" phase, clearly implying that this work is not a part of the project because it is done before the project gets going. Consequently, it is not a part of project management.

Well, why not?

At the same time there are also many case studies published describing "project failure", and frequently attributing that failure to some failure of the work at the project's "Front End", i.e., before the project "started". Indeed, Peter W. G. Morris, in an excellent conference article: *Managing the front end*, states categorically:⁶

"There has long been a great deal of evidence that the front-end of projects is where things can go badly wrong and, conversely, where there is the best chance of a positively influencing the chances of a successful outcome. Our knowledge of just what this entails, however, has often been hazy and too often project managers have been excluded from this vital area."

So, if all these failures are reportedly resulting in the waste of millions of dollars annually, and we want to reduce that wastage, then why is this so-called front-end investment not included in the standards for project management practice?

We cannot presume to reduce this wastage if we do not tackle the problem at its source.

As an aside, it is interesting that while there has been little evidence in academic works of guidance of how to manage the "Front end" of the project life span, there has recently been more attention to the "Back-end", i.e., after the project has finished. Indeed, there have been suggestions that the responsibilities of the project organization should be extended beyond the delivery of a product asset of value, to the work of delivering the intended benefits.⁷

An Internet search

In searching the Internet for a more plausible answer, I came across a lengthy discussion initiated by one: Suhail Iqbal, a project management lecturer in Pakistan.⁸ In a long posting to his discussion group, he said in part:⁹

"A very interesting and thought provoking question, project managers wonder about is 'When does a project really start?' . . .

For an outsider, a simple check would be [when] only the project budget can be spent on the project's activities. Wherever, the organization has drawn a line between pre-project and project work, that defines when the spending should begin."

But stop right there. That is where I have another problem.

Several official standards do indeed entertain the concept of "Pre-project activities", that is, before the project is "initiated". In other words, that refers to all the effort that goes into ensuring that the intended project is properly defined, set up, justified, necessary permissions or approvals obtained, and a proper starting plan established. Pre-project or not, all of that costs money spent by somebody somewhere.

Not only that, but according to a number of post-project analyses, a large number of project failures can be attributed to failure in conducting responsible and effective so-called "front-end" work. If all of that is so important to ultimate project success, why is it so glibly cast aside as "pre-project"? And thereafter, almost completely ignored in the subsequent almost bone chilling details found in many authoritative

tomes on how to run the rest of the project?

Suhail continues:

"In my opinion, a project starts when the budget and the scope have been approved and accepted by the sponsor and the top management, and as soon as the kick-off meeting has been performed. That means that once you have set up a meeting with the project team, and started to give them the first steps to move forward with their responsibilities, I consider that my project has started to move forward."¹⁰

That's fine, but here Suhail is clearly referring to his part of the project, which is the start of actual production of the project's intended *asset*.¹¹ As noted earlier, a lot of work should have been done before that in terms of justification, finance sourcing, planning, organizing, approvals, and so on.

From my perspective, I think that *all of that so-called pre-project activity should be included as a fundamental and essential part of every project*. Thus, Suhail's project had in fact already started when *his part of the work* began. And that would be true of any similar project, even if a project budget had not yet been set, or if that particular component or whole project was subsequently aborted.

A more recent view in the discussion

This discussion initiated by Suhail has dragged on for about three years. Lately, one recent contributor observed: "... a project starts with signing the [Project] Charter". To this, Peter Rapin¹², another contributor to the discussion had this to say:

"This may serve as a theoretical statement but rarely reflects reality!

- 1) Many projects do not have Project Charters.
- 2) For a number of reasons Project Charters get delayed: no staff; stakeholders not fully identified; insufficient details; procrastination; effort applied on other tasks.
- 3) Many of us believe that the Project Charter should be developed by the Project Manager and/or Project Team – an early project task.
- 4) The Project Charter developed too early in the process may be a Statement of Objectives rather than providing required input and commitments.
- 5) Project Charters can take ages to sign especially if you have complex stakeholder involvement requiring specific commitments.

I revert back to my initial definition of project start: "*When an effort is first applied specifically to achieve a stated defined objective*".

In other words, those activities lumped under the umbrella of "pre-project activities" are in fact a part of the project and, I suggest, should be included in the Project Life Span structure and described accordingly in project management manuals.

Pre-project study

To repeat in generic terms:

- The goal of project management is to end up with a satisfactory and potentially successful asset in terms of potential to generate benefit;
- To lay the foundation for a successful project, it is necessary to address a number of basic questions at a high level;

- This is typically done in a period often referred to as "Pre-project studies", or analysis, as shown in Figure 5.

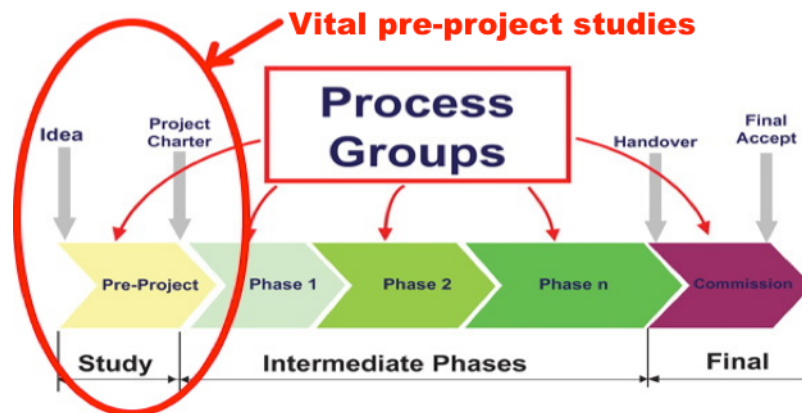


Figure 5: Essential project front-end analysis and structuring for project success

These questions cover a number of issues such as:

- What is the goal and scope of this project at a conceptual level, and is it a need or an opportunity?
- What are our expectations from the project, what will our asset look like, and is it the best option?
- Is it really necessary, does it support corporate strategy, and do relevant stakeholders support it?
- What level of quality, in a range from best-of-the-best to simple-and-acceptable, are we expecting in the resulting asset?
- How long should it take, and are the risks within reasonable bounds?
- Can we afford it, and where will the money come from?

Also there are questions regarding resources, such as:

- Do we have the manpower resources, and if not, where will we find them?
- Is there a dead line for delivery, or roughly how long do we expect the project to take?
- Who is, or will be, the project owner?
- Who will be the official sponsor?
- Who will likely be the project manager, or shall we need to recruit one?
- When can we expect a formal expenditure authorization to be able to move forward?

These questions need objective study through business analysis, validation, and resolution. When the findings have been documented and accepted by upper management, then this is evidence that the project has *actually* started. It is now ready for an *official* start date and entry into the beginning of the project *Initiation* phase. Clearly, this is all an essential part of any significant project, and therefore ***should be recognized as an essential part of the project life span.***

Summary

I believe that irrespective of any arbitrary notional "start-date" assigned for purposes of project bookkeeping, contract compliance or perhaps political gain, the real and absolute project start is when any money is spent on a particular project objective.

That is, when any effort, time and money from any source whatsoever, is spent specifically in the pursuit

of a particular project to create any form of asset. That includes all so-called "front-end" work such as conceptualizing, preliminary planning, justification, organization, financing, sourcing, and necessary approvals. In fact, the owner of any potential project must typically and necessarily accept the cost of all of this effort up front. It may be absorbed into the organization's general overhead, or charged to the anticipated project's cost account, before the work of asset production actually begins.¹³ Whichever way the work is costed, it is still an essential part of the project life span.

Unfortunately, in many project management standards this work, and cost, is glibly passed over as "Pre-project activity". Yet it is vital to the success of a project, even if, at this stage, it does not warrant the full time attention of a project manager.

It is my hope that with this knowledge being brought to front and center in our practice of serious project management, the rate of project successes will then be significantly improved.

R Max Wideman

¹ Note: Many people insist on using the term (project life) cycle and justify that by making the connection to the reproduction of wild life generally. Or indeed, trotting out the comparison to the birth, marriage and death of the family life cycle. However, the life of an individual is not cyclical – you are born, you live, and you end, just like a project. At no time, so far, are you able to cycle back to an earlier age. What has gone by has gone by – just as in a project and you would not refer your life existence as a "cycle". So, some other word, rather than "cycle" is needed to convey a project's life span. My choice is "span".

² Part 1 of this paper, Introduction, item 4

³ No doubt as a compromise over multifarious disagreements.

⁴ ISO Project Management Definitions, www.iso.org

⁵ A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, 6th Edition, ©2017 Project Management Institute, Inc., Newtown Square, PA, Glossary page 715

⁶ Morris, P. W. G. (2005) *Managing the front end: how project managers shape business strategy and manage project definition*. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2005 – EMEA, Edinburgh, Scotland, Newton Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

⁷ It seems to me that this position is untenable since it is unlike managing a project, requires different skills, and trespasses into the field of Business as Usual.

⁸ Suhail Iqbal is a lecturer in project management, a member of PMI, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

⁹ First posted May 15, 2017, on ProjectManagement.com.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Given its meaning, the term "asset" used here appears more appropriate than the rather vague use of the terms "Deliverables, outcomes, or results" that are found in most project management texts.

Specifically, according to Wikipedia, an "asset" is anything tangible or intangible that can be owned or controlled to produce value, and is held by a company to produce positive economic value. Simply stated, assets represent value of ownership that can be converted into cash. Note that there are two major asset classes: tangible assets and intangible assets.

¹² Contribution by Peter Rapin on ProjectManagement.com, April 13, 2020. Peter is a Subject Matter Expert (SME) in Project Delivery, Independent Consultant, Canada.

¹³ In many jurisdictions these costs in particular are permitted to be included in the company's tax claims for the capital cost allowance for the project in question.