

Defining the term "Project" in the context of Project Management

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Except for text quoted by others, the views expressed are strictly those of Max Wideman.

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Introduction

" 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said [to Alice] in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.' "

In Alice's Adventures - Through the Looking Glass, by Lewis Carroll

For some time now, the "official"¹ definition of the word **Project** has been criticized as being weak and insufficient. For example, Dr. Lynda Bourne has recently posted an excellent short analysis in her blog, titled: *Seeking a definition of a project*. In it, she says in part:²

" Good definitions are short and unambiguous and are essential for almost every aspect of life. Even something as simple as ordering a snack requires a clear understanding of what's required – this understanding is the basis of a definition."

"The simple fact is if you cannot define something precisely, you have real problems explaining what it is, what it does and the value it offers, and this lack of definition/understanding seems to be a key challenge facing the project management community. Definitions serve two interlinked purposes, they describe the subject of the definition in sufficient detail to allow the concept to be recognized and understood and they exclude similar 'concepts' that do not fit the definition. Definitions do not explain the subject, [they] merely define it."

"Way back in 2002 we suggested the definition of 'a project' was flawed. Almost any temporary work organized to achieve an objective could fit into almost all of the definitions currently in use – unfortunately not much has changed since. PMI's definition of a 'project' is still a: temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result. This definition is imprecise – for example, a football team engaged in a match is involved in:

- A temporary endeavor – the match lasts a defined time.
- Undertaken to create a unique result – the papers are full of results on the weekend and each match is unique.
- Undertaken to create a unique product or service – the value is in the entertainment provided to fans, either as a 'product' (using a marketing perspective) or as a service to the team's fans.

Add in elements from other definitions of a project such as a 'defined start and end', 'planned sequence of activities', etcetera and you still fail to clearly differentiate a team engaged in a project from a football team engaged in a match; but no-one considers a game of football a project. Football captains may be team leaders, but they are not 'project managers'."

While we are sympathetic towards the intent, we are not sure this argument is valid. After all, just because no one calls a football match a project, is that sufficient reason for not calling it a project? And that is especially if it fits the presumed criteria of a project?³ Perhaps the reason why football team managers do not call themselves a project manager is because they feel that this label does not feel appropriate to their status!⁴

Lynda's suggested update

Lynda Bourne goes on to state:⁵

"Since 2002 there has been a significant amount of academic work undertaken that looks at how projects really function which may provide the basis for a better definition of a project. The key area of research has been focused on describing projects as temporary organizations that need governing and managing. That is, as a standalone organization involving actors from many different 'permanent organizations' such as the group of people assembled on a construction site. Or alternatively as a temporary organization within a larger organization such as an internal project team (particularly cross-functional project teams).

The research suggests that all projects are undertaken by temporary teams that are assembled to undertake the work and then dissipate at the end of the project."

Further, Lynda observes that:

"... whilst every project involves a temporary organization, many temporary organizations are not involved in projects. Another issue is the focus on outputs – a product service or result; the output is not the project, the project is the work needed to create the output. Once the output is finished, the project ceases to exist! A building project is the work involved in creating the building, once the building is finished it is a building, not a project."

Amen to that. She then points out:

"The scope of the work involved in any particular project is determined by its stakeholders – projects are a construct created by people for their mutual convenience, not by some immutable fact of nature."

After adding further strengths to her argument, Lynda offers the following definition and explanation:

"A project is a temporary organization established to accomplish an agreed scope of work, within defined constraints, which the relevant stakeholders agree shall be managed as a project."

This definition overcomes many of the fundamental problems with the existing options:

- It recognizes projects are done by people, for people; they are not amorphous expenditures of 'energy'.
- It allows for the fact that projects do not exist in nature, they are 'artificial constructs' created by people for their mutual convenience, and different people confronting similar objectives can create very different arrangements to accomplish the work.
- It recognizes that projects are only projects if the people doing the work and the people overseeing the work decide to treat the work as a project."

Unfortunately, this definition is also circular. If we don't know what a project is in the first place, how can "the relevant stakeholders agree to manage [the work] as a project"?!

Having attempted several definitions of the term "Project" ourselves over the years, we thought it was time to take a look at the history of this topic.

A historical perspective

The term Project is a common word in the English language and when used as a noun means some sort of planned undertaking⁶, a plan or a scheme⁷, or assignment, job, task, undertaking, or work.⁸ However, from a professional project manager's perspective, what we want to know is not what everyone thinks it means in common usage, but rather what *we want* it to mean in the context of professional project management. Note the "what we want it to mean!" This freedom of choice is important because **the word "Project" is the bedrock of a project manager's activities and all the responsibilities that we want to attach to the practice of Project Management.**

The first Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) document was officially issued by the Project Management Institute's PMI Standards Committee in March 28, 1987 and implemented for Certification effective September 1988. You might say that this was the birth of project management, as we know it today. Of course, some form of project management has been practiced for centuries – just think of the pyramids for instance.

Before general publication, the first draft of the PMBOK document was distributed for review to all PMI members in 1986. The objective was to provide a sound, comprehensive and coordinated reference source to underpin PMI's growing certification program. Prior to that, several PMI standing committees had been working on various drafts of the functional areas, now generally known as the Knowledge Areas. The collective effort was brought together under a project assigned the number "#121" by the PMI Board of Directors.

Here is an extract from the original PMBOK, 1987:⁹

"In the course of Project #121, a significant degree of consensus was reached on a number of basic issues not previously defined. For example, there was unanimity over the need for simplicity and universality within the PMI PMBOK development mandate. There was also no difficulty in accepting the following definition of a project:

A project is any undertaking with a defined starting point and defined objectives by which completion is identified. In practice, most projects depend on finite or limited resources by which the objectives are to be accomplished.

It should be noted that the definition of project does not require a long dissertation as to how its objectives are to be achieved. This is intrinsic in the definition of project management!"

It should be remembered that this conclusion was concurred by some 80 PMI members who participated in the assembly of PMBOK 1987 through sub committees and workshops, and validated by the 16 high ranking members of the PMI Standards Committee.

By the 1990s it was felt that an update of the original PMBOK was required, so in 1996 a replacement document was produced. In fact, this was not an update but a completely new approach. First it was called a "Guide" and secondly it took a systems approach to trying to explain how all the components previously identified actually fit together. This document took an enormous amount of effort to produce and unfortunately had some serious shortcomings.¹⁰

This is not the place to criticize PMBOK 1996, but it is relevant to note that the definition of "Project" was reduced to:¹¹

"A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service."

This definition has remained essentially the same ever since.¹²

Clearly, this latest definition falls far short of what most project managers are expected to strive for, in their everyday project work. As a consequence, since then many authors have attempted their own definitions to support whatever the intent is in their ensuing works.

The real problem

As Dr. Lynda Bourne observes: "This definition is imprecise, ..." ¹³ However, she then goes on to make comparison with a football match. This is all well and good but it misses the point. It is the wrong comparison.

The point that the PMI Standards teams struggled mightily with, in developing the original PMBOK document in the 1980s, was how to differentiate Project Management from General Management¹⁴ and how to make that clear in their standard definitions. And real differences do exist. For example:

- Actual time and costs of a new, unique, outcomes are the consequences of the work involved and how it is managed, and not established by fiat.¹⁵
- The change in management attitudes as a consequence.
- The uncertainty that a project implies and the special need to manage risks.
- If not self evident, management may decide to deliberately manage an initiative as a Project.¹⁶

So the real problem is:

How do we reflect these distinctions in the founding definitions of project management?

Over the past sixteen years, in the course of updating our Wideman Comparative Glossary of Project Management Terms, we have collected a number of definitions that we think have distinctive value.¹⁷ The results are instructive. In the next page we have assembled this list of author definitions for ease of reference.

If you find the list gets too boring to read, just skip to the last page: *Summary conclusions*. Keep in mind, however, that we have three definitions referenced so far, as shown in Table 1.

#	Status	Definition	Source
1	PMI's original founding definition	Any undertaking with a defined starting point and defined objectives by which completion is identified. In practice most projects depend on finite or limited resources with which the objectives are to be accomplished.	Original PMBOK 1987, Glossary, p22
2	PMI's current definition	A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, or service [or result].	PMBOK® Guide 1996 to 2016
3	Dr. Bourne's suggested update.	A project is a temporary organization established to accomplish an agreed scope of work, within defined constraints, which the relevant stakeholders agree shall be managed as a project. ¹⁸	Dr. Lynda Bourne's blog, extracted August, 2016

4	[Your suggestion]	
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Table 1: PMI's original definition of "Project" and subsequent offerings

Definitions of "project" by various authors

The definitions in the following Table have been selected for inclusion in the next version of the Wideman Comparative Glossary of Project Management Terms.¹⁹ The "Key Words & Phrases" column identifies thoughts that are not reflected in PMI's current definition of the term "Project". Of course many of these "new thoughts" are repeated in other definitions. We do not necessarily agree with all of them but the fact is, they are out there publicly.

Ref #	Definition	PMGloss Source	Date	Key Words & Phrases	PM Unique	
					Yes	No
1342	A process for conducting work that produces a new product of one sort or another.	RMW	9/21/99	Process, work		X
1343	A process or undertaking that encompasses an entire set of activities having a definable starting point and well-defined objectives the delivery of which signal the completion of the project. Projects are usually required to be accomplished within limited resources.	CCCP	9/21/99	Activities, start point, signal completion, limited resources	X	
1344	A set of activities directed to an overall goal. Also, the collection of data relating to the achievement of that goal. More specifically, a network of activities, or file(s) containing such a network.	WST	9/21/99	A network of activities, goal		X
1345	A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service.	PMK96	9/21/99	PMI's current definition		X
1346	A unique venture with a beginning and an end, undertaken by people to meet established goals within defined constraints of time, resources, and quality.	OTOB	9/21/99	Unique, venture, people, constraints		X
1347	An endeavor in which human, material and financial resources are organized in a novel way, to undertake a unique scope of work of given specification, within constraints of cost and time, so as to achieve unitary, beneficial change, through delivery of quantified and qualitative objectives.	011	9/21/99	Human, material and financial resources, novel, unitary beneficial change		X
1348	An organized undertaking utilizing human and physical resources, done once, to accomplish a specific goal, which is normally defined by a Triple Constraint.	SPM	9/21/99	Physical resources, done once		X
1349	An organized undertaking, limited in time to achieve specific objectives.	NPMT	9/21/99	Organized		X
1350	Any temporary, organized effort that creates a one-time product, service, process, or plan.	PMMJ97	9/21/99	Organized, one-time		X
1351	Any undertaking that has a defined objective, a cost parameter, and a time element for its development. A cluster of activities that are pulled together to deliver something of value to a customer.	003	9/21/99	Cost parameter, development, value, customer	?	?
1353	A novel undertaking or systematic process to create a new product or service the delivery of which signals completion. Projects involve risk and are typically constrained by limited resources.	RMW	9/21/99	Unique, novel, signals completion, risk, constraint	X	
2619	A unique, novel and transient endeavor undertaken to achieve novel objectives and involving considerable risk and uncertainty	023	8/24/00	Unique, novel, transient	X	

3426	A systematic process for achieving a distinct objective. The "system" consists of a period of planning followed by a period of "doing", and this system is repeated at every level of detail. These two "periods" are the genesis of the project life span. Project management is the process of managing the project process.	RMW	9/18/00	Systematic, plan before doing, genesis, project life span, project process	X	
3604	A one-time effort to accomplish an explicit objective by a specific time. Each project is unique although similar projects may exist. Like the individual activity, the project has a distinguishable start and finish and a time frame for completion. Each activity in the project will be monitored and controlled to determine its impact on other activities and projects.	PMST	7/6/00	One time, distinguishable start and finish, impact		X
3909	A temporary management environment, which is created in order to achieve a particular business objective through the control and co-ordination of logistical and technical resources.	PNG	9/27/00	Environment, business objective, control		X
4589	A unique set of coordinated activities, with definite starting and finishing points, undertaken by an individual or organization to meet specific objectives within defined time, cost and performance parameters. See also BS ISO 10006.	APM	12/11/08	Coordinated activities, organization, parameters	?	?
4751	Projects are performed by people, constrained by limited resources, and planned, executed, and controlled. A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service. Temporary means that every project has a definite beginning and a definite ending. Unique means that the product or service is different in some distinguishing way from all similar products and services. Projects are often critical components of the performing organizations' business strategy.	RUP	6/24/00	People, executed, controlled, definite beginning and end, distinguishing way, critical components, strategy	?	?
5066	A human endeavor legitimately regarded by its stakeholders as a project (because) it encompasses a unique scope of work that is constrained by cost and time (and) the purpose of which is to create or modify a product or service to achieve beneficial change defined by quantitative and qualitative objectives.	043	12/15/01	Legitimate, stakeholders, scope of work, create, modify, beneficial change	?	?
5067	A structure to complete a specific defined deliverable or set of deliverables. A project has a specific begin date and end date, specific objectives and specific resources assigned to perform the work. A project manager has overall responsibility and authority over a project. When the objectives are met, the project is considered complete.	TM	12/15/01	Structure, defined, begin/end date, work, responsibility, parameters	X	
5068	A unique set of coordinated activities, with definite starting and finishing points, undertaken by an individual or organization to meet specific objectives within a defined schedule of cost and performance parameters.	057	12/15/01	Coordinated activities, organization, performance parameters		X
5069	Any organized business activity where an investment is made. It most commonly refers to the work of creating and operating a physical asset, such as a bridge or a building. However, it need not involve the creation of a new physical asset at all, for example if a company launches a new product that has been manufactured by existing assets. The project extends over the whole investment lifecycle of activity, not just the initial phases while the investment is being made.	RAMP	12/15/01	Business activity, investment, physical asset, lifecycle		X
5204	An undertaking that is focused on acquiring a specific product. The product may include hardware, software, and services. Typically, a project has its own funding, cost accounting, and delivery schedule.	SA-CMM	2/10/02	Focus, acquiring hardware, software		X

5432	A temporary organization in a management environment created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to a specified business case. A project is a finite process with a definite start and end. Projects always need to be managed in order to be successful.	PRNCX2	12/15/02	Environment, business products, business case, finite process, successful		X
5690	The work required to convert an opportunity into an asset.	070	2/17/05	Work, convert, opportunity	?	?
5819	A means for delivering strategy and beneficial change, e.g. added value, through discrete and unique pieces of work carried out by temporary teams under strict constraints and subject to uncertainty.	RMW	7/23/06	Strategy, beneficial change, work, teams, uncertainty		X
6133	A set of actions that are focused on an established set of outcomes.	117	12/17/08	Outcomes		X
6134	A container for work focused on a unique product.	116	12/17/08	Container		X
6135	A mechanism for the acquisition/creation and perhaps implementation of an enabler.	BRM	12/17/08	Acquisition/creation, enabler		X
6136	A sequence of unique, complex, and connected activities having one goal or purpose that must be completed by a specific time, within budget, and according to specification.	114	12/17/08	Sequence, complex, connected, specification		X
6137	A structured set of activities concerned with delivering to the enterprise a defined capability based on an agreed schedule and budget.	115	12/17/08	Structure, enterprise, budget	?	?
6482	A time-constrained operation to realize a set of definable deliverables up to quality standards and requirements, the scope of which fulfills the project's objectives.	IPMA	3/9/12	Time-constrained, operation, deliverables		X
6483	A whole set of actions limited in time and space, inserted in, and in interaction with, a politico-socio-economic environment, aimed at and tended towards a goal progressively redefined by the dialectic between thought (the project plan) and the reality.	PMJ	3/9/12	Set of actions, space, politico-socio-economic environment, dialectic, reality	?	?
6936	A temporary organization that is created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to an agreed Business Case.	PRNC2	7/23/16	Organization, business products, Business Case		X
6937	A temporary organization to which resources are assigned to do work to bring about beneficial change.	139	7/23/16	Resources, assigned, beneficial change		X

**Table 2: Definitions of "Project" selected for inclusion in the next version of the Wideman Comparative Glossary
DO YOU AGREE WITH THE *PM UNIQUE CHOICES*?**

Summary conclusions

There appears to be no doubt that the current definition of the term "Project" is unsatisfactory in the eyes of many project management practitioners. Indeed, we think that the definition of Project in the context of project management should at least reflect, and form the basis of, what we do as project managers. It is true that much of what we do can be found in the management of Business as Usual, but that applies to any management responsibility.

So managing a football team is no exception. In any case, the assembly of a football team for a one-off match in a competition may well be viewed as a project.²⁰ And the manager of such a team may one day

be referred to as a project manager.

Who knows? After all, the discipline of project management is expanding rapidly. But by the same token, a team that belongs to an owner as a part of a franchise expected to play repeated games is definitely not a project but rather Business as Usual and represents a valid contrast.

Still, before we get carried away with games of football, let us make a real effort to come up with a more comprehensive definition of the term "Project", given the terms in Table 2 as a framework. We need a definition that will better underpin the concepts of our professional project management responsibilities.²¹

¹ By "official" we mean the definition touted by PMI® for several years now and adopted by other organizations with only minor variations.

² Mosaicproject's Blog: *Seeking a definition of a project*, posted on August 11, 2016 at <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com>

³ Actually, a football match does not fit the presumed criteria of a project because the time limits are set by decree and not by the ultimate delivery of the stated objectives, as is the case with a project.

⁴ Or perhaps football team managers are simply not familiar with the term.

⁵ For a complete transcript, see Lynda's Blog as in previous Endnote.

⁶ Webster's Concise Electronic Dictionary

⁷ Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary

⁸ The Random House Thesaurus

⁹ PMBOK, March 28, 1987, PMBOK Standards, p0-2

¹⁰ Major problems include the labeling of management processes that get mistaken for project lifespan phases, and as a result together with the systems depiction, many people attempt to use the guide as a project management methodology rather than as a repository of knowledge.

¹¹ PMBOK guide 1996, Project Management Institute, Glossary p167

¹² Some time later, "or result" has been added at the tail end, an addition that does not change the lack of intent.

¹³ See our earlier Introduction.

¹⁴ Today, "General Management" is often referred to in project management texts as "Business as Usual" (BaU).

¹⁵ As in a football game.

¹⁶ The alternative is to run the initiative through the organization's "stove pipe" management structure. Or just leave it up to chaos.

¹⁷ Version 6.0 is now a work in progress.

¹⁸ If you don't know what a project is in the first place, how can you manage it as such?

¹⁹ See Note 17.

²⁰ Except see Note 3 earlier.

²¹ One final lingering thought: "Can a project exist even if it is not managed at all, perhaps just a voyage of discovery? We think it can."