

Defining Project Success – Part 1

Do current project management standards make the answer clear?

This paper is the first of a four-part series in which an attempt has been made to capture the collective wisdom of the leading participants in an extended LinkedIn discussion over the first six months of 2014. The actual original texts have been edited for grammar and spelling to make for easier reading on line. The observations quoted are the opinions and property of the contributors as noted. Published here August 2014.

Editor's Note:

The following Words of Wisdom from various authors are intended to capture and summarize the most valuable ideas expressed in the conversation about defining project success. It is a consolidated summary of a long, but important, discussion on LinkedIn between February 17 and May 9, 2014. It is important because it represents the collective views of some of the most influential professionals in the field of project management. Of course, the "success" of a project, means different things to different people, but what does it mean for the project manager? Is there any consistent position that a project manager can firmly embrace? Once again, it all depends . . .

To keep the summary manageable, we have chosen to select just 10 of the 63 participants who contributed during the period, but who also subscribed a total of more than 300 words. The following pages provide an interesting summary from the selected respondents. Their contributions have been edited to facilitate easier web site reading. These people are practicing experts and likely represent a condensed view of the millions of diverse responses already available on the Internet.

Except for the initiator of the conversation that follows, contributors appear in the order of their first participation in the discussion. In consolidating the contributions of the participants to the discussion, the conversational thread may not always be clear, but we have used the "@"¹ sign as a means of connection to help with continuity. We believe that this situation is a small tradeoff for the benefit of consolidating the underlying viewpoints.

We hope that you will find this condensed summary useful as we feel that it represents real-world experience rather than 'standard' or academic advocacy.

Introduction by Matthew Weaver, PMP, CSM, ITIL²

Matthew started off the LinkedIn conversation with the question:

"How do you define project success?"

Matthew then followed his own question with this observation:

While I realize this is a recurring topic,³ I note this morning as I work through the PMBOK⁴ 5th edition, that they have added a new section "Project Success" (page 35) that clarifies rather succinctly the definition of project success and the project manager's role in it:

"Success of the project should be measured in terms of completing the project within the constraints of scope, time, cost, quality, resources, and risks as approved between the project managers [sic] and senior management."

Later, the PMBOK authors write:

"Project success should be referred to the last baselines approved by the authorized stakeholders."

(So much for the Standish reports that instead like to harp on initial scope, schedule, and cost baselines!)

"The project manager is responsible and accountable for setting realistic and achievable boundaries for the project and to accomplish the project within the approved baselines."

Nowhere is the project manager responsible for whether the project is a good idea or not, wanted or not, etc. In fact, it is the responsibility of the project's *sponsor* to promote the project, not the project manager. (See PMBOK page 32.)

How does this fit with, or diverge, from your view of project success from the project manager's perspective?

Bill Duncan:⁵ PMBOK definition woefully deficient

@Matthew: the definition of success you quoted is basically the traditional definition ... and it is woefully deficient and outdated. First, "project success" has two dimensions:

- **Product success:** did the project deliver the benefits expected?
- **Project management success:** was the project well-managed?

Your quoted definition addresses only the second dimension. More significantly, project success must be measured against agreed success criteria. The baselines seldom represent real success.

As you note in your reply, this success is from the project manager's perspective, and from that perspective only. I agree that product success is not the direct responsibility of the project manager, but they must still be aware of what is needed for product success and do everything they can to deliver it. Here are some simple examples ... the Sydney Opera House is a failed project. The Boeing 787 is a success. Really?

@Matthew: You say: "Why is everyone so anxious to take on responsibility as project manager for something they were never asked, never involved in, and have no role or influence in?!" I don't think that anyone is asking the project manager to take responsibility for *product* success. I know I'm not. But in point of fact, the project manager has the potential to make a substantial contribution to product success. For the PM to ignore that potential is a step back into the 1950s.

Let's take a look at your example: The project that you describe was a success from Company A's perspective, but a total failure from Company B's perspective. You are right to celebrate project management success, but not project success. Project success must consider a broader range of stakeholders.

@Matthew: you may disagree, but if you go back and look at my first post, you'll see that I said from the start that there were two different constructs: product success and project management success. These two together define "project success."⁶ The PMBoK just got it wrong this time by referring to "project management success" as "project success."

Matthew Weaver: PMBOK definition not deficient

@Bill: The PMBOK definition is not woefully deficient or outdated. This is project success in terms of the project from the project manager's perspective. There is nothing wrong or incomplete about this. Product success is not in the project manager's scope of control or responsibility, never was. It is a

completely different topic and is the sole purview of the sponsor.

I think it is very important to consider our focus. As a project manager there is only so much we have responsibility or control over. Do you really want to be assessed based on senior management and your sponsors wild idea that you had no input on or influence over? Seriously, a bad idea, delivered well is a successful project. Otherwise, if you claim as part of your measure of success, the bad idea, then you get punished at review for it, you get demoted, and maybe even fired. Again, for something you had zero visibility or role in. No, PMBOK has it right. You cannot, and it is not fair to judge your success on factors outside your influence. From the project manager's perspective, the only possible measures are scope, schedule, cost, etc.

Think of it this way, company B contracts with company A to deliver product X for \$1M on x date. You get assigned by your management, who won the contract to do the work. Your team delivers X on budget and on time. Maybe you have even addressed \$500K of change requests, also on budget and on time. By all accounts for your company and for you, the project is a success. Right? What else do you have to do with it?

Later, if you read in the news that company B filed for bankruptcy after releasing product X to a market that had zero interest in it, is that your fault? Does that change the success you and your company celebrated? I think not. Why is everyone so anxious to take on responsibility as project manager for something they were never asked, never involved in, and have no role or influence in?!

@Bill: I completely disagree with you on all points. Project, and project management if you insist, success is defined by scope, schedule, cost, etc. Instead, product, service, or result success is what you are talking about. These two things are very, very different. Note, by the way, PMBOK does not talk about "project management" success. It explicitly talks about *project* success. Nowhere does the PMBOK talk about "project management success". They are talking about *project* success, and not *product* success that you are so keen to discuss instead.

If you want to talk separately about product, service, or result success, then that would be a good topic of discussion. And in that separate discussion we could explore what the project manager's role and responsibilities are and are not.

Vince McGevna⁷ Project and product management not the same

The PMBoK is about project management, not product management. So it stands to reason its definition of success would focus on the project. Projects produce many different products in many different areas for many different customers. It would not be feasible to tackle this in one body of knowledge.

My particular role in product success is largely determined by the organization I work for. On some projects I was tasked with developing a fully defined product to the best of my abilities. My ability to manage product success depended on my interaction with sales and marketing, something I did not always have control of. In others I have been a critical member of a core team where product and project are closely managed together. In the latter situation my ability to impact product success was much greater.

Similarly, how you define real project success is a function of the organization and the nature of the

projects. Part of it has to do with how an organization is set up for success, as defined by PMI. Having managed many projects pushing the bleeding edge of a technology, it is extremely difficult to predict cost and schedule when key aspects of scope are only discovered long after the initial planning. However, organizations that engage in this type of work accept this as part of doing business. Going back to the original triple constraint – cost, schedule and scope – these do not have the same priority, and the successful project manager understands which takes precedent and manages accordingly.

My experience in product development, scope is frequently most important and it is important to deliver a product that meets all functional and quality requirements. (I personally consider quality to be an integral part of scope.) On some projects there is a real drop dead date, and then it is my responsibility to deliver maximum value within the allotted time. Cost is primarily for resources, and is closely tied to schedule. Managing risk is also critical to success, but this is something I relate to cost schedule or scope to quantify.

@Larry: the role that the PM plays in the selection of projects depends on the organization and their business. In product development the decisions on what projects to do are made by marketing with heavy input from engineers and light input from PMs. In companies where I've worked, marketing is responsible for a roadmap – where is the product line going in the next 5-10 years. Priorities are set based on the business case and resource requirements.

This roadmap generally goes through a scrubbing quarterly where near term projects will start getting strawman resource assignments to make sure they can be done. Again this is all done with input from marketing engineering and project management. As projects complete and resources free up new projects are started in accordance with the roadmap.

I've managed many of these projects and have observed many more and have not seen that this causes any problems in implementation. The carefully thought out and periodically updated roadmap means that projects are chosen to meet the organization's overall goals. Of course, some organizations do this better than others.

Larry Moore:⁸ PMBOK fine so far as it goes

When we evaluate and/or discuss the definitions of project success or failure, I believe that we must be careful to distinguish between the PROJECT itself and the PRODUCT of the Project. If a project is completed according to specifications, on time, and under budget, but the product produced or implemented is found to be inadequate to meet the organization's needs, will this project be considered successful by the organization as a whole?

Unfortunately, the management and executives of most organizations tend not to make a distinction between the project and the product (this is especially true for organizations that are not mature with respect to project management). So it is not unusual for a "successful" project to be labeled as "unsuccessful" if the end product turns out to be not as effective as anticipated for reasons beyond the scope of the project.

One of the ways to prevent this kind of situation is to place great emphasis on the Project Initiation phase of the project (with many, if not most projects, this is not done). If sufficient effort is put into assuring that the right PRODUCT is either chosen or defined, the chances of the project's being

considered a success are greatly enhanced.

Actually, the original question was (and I quote) "How does this fit with or diverge from your view of project success from the project manager's perspective?" This question was in reference to Matthew's several quotes from the PMBoK. So, I take it that Matthew is interested in our personal opinions as to what constitutes project success. From my own perspective, I believe that the quotes from the PMBoK are fine as far as they go. However, I think there is something to be added to this regarding the actual success or failure of a project. I think that the *qualities* of the PRODUCT of the project must be included in the evaluation of the project.

It is entirely possible to complete a project according to all of the constraints (time, scope, budget, quality, etc.) and to have a project that might or should be deemed a failure. A Project Manager can manage a project very well and end up producing the wrong product for the organization. For example, in my world of IT projects, the organization might have already selected the product they want (or think they want) and then define the project as installing and setting up that product. Then, after the project is completed, they discover that they chose the wrong product in the first place.

In my view, that project is not successful. Such a project should have been expanded to include a thorough evaluation of alternative products prior to beginning the installation & implementation project. I am very interested to see if anyone shares this perspective.

I cannot agree with the suggestion that: "Whether or not project managers have input into the product choice is irrelevant." While it is unfortunately very common to have products chosen without any input from the project manager that will be tasked with the installation or implementation project, this is certainly not the way it should be.

I believe that the choice of a product to be implemented should be treated as a project in itself, (separate from the implementation project) and it should have an assigned project team and be directed by a PM. Doing so eliminates or minimizes many problems that commonly occur with implementation projects. Failure to do so just invites (and in many cases guarantees) that the implementation project will encounter many issues and/or problems and the implementation project will eventually be viewed to be unsuccessful because the organization's overall goals and objectives that generated the project have not been met.

In the case where the assigned PM actually knows at the beginning of the project that the wrong product has been chosen, what should that PM do about this? Does the PM have some responsibility to make others aware of this? Or, should the PM take the attitude that, if the organization ends up implementing the wrong product that this just isn't his/her problem because he/she was not involved in the product choice?

Although a Project Manager is usually not the final decision-maker regarding what constitutes the product of a project, in many cases the project manager is a critical part of that decision-making. In my world of IT projects, this is very common.

Let me give you an example from my own personal experience: Let's say that an organization needs to implement a new Human Resources and Payroll Management solution (perhaps because of business growth, modernization, cost containment, etc.). This organization is certainly not going to try to design, build and implement a new solution because there are numerous packaged solutions available at a much

lower cost. All can provide all of the functionality needed, and they can be implemented much more quickly than with custom software development. For this environment, there are at least a dozen very viable solutions from many different software vendors. So, selecting the best solution to implement becomes a critical success factor.

While most of these solutions can provide approximately the same functions, features, and benefits, the costs of a full implementation can vary by extreme amounts. One solution can easily cost 3-4 times what another viable solution might cost (and these cost differences can easily amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars, or even more). Most of this variation in total costs is not in the licensing or purchase cost of the solution, but rather in the cost of the implementation project itself.

So, an evaluation and analysis process must be undertaken to decide on which product should be implemented. This is where a Project Manager really must be included as a participant in this process. Who else can determine the scope, timeframe, and costs of an implementation project better than a Project Manager? While this situation might not be common in many environments, it is almost a de facto standard in the IT environment. It is certainly not the case that all organizations do things this way for IT projects, but those who do have a much better chance of project success.

Andrea Giovanni Spelta:⁹ Useful references

Matthew started this discussion by saying "While I realize this is a recurring topic..." Indeed, practitioners and researchers have been discussing what is the meaning of project success since 1988 (see the following references obtained during a literature review I have made for a research). Today it is a generally accepted statement to say there are many dimensions of project success, and project management success is just one of them. If the PMBOK does not make this point clear yet, then it should be rectified in a new version.

- WIT, A. D. Measurement of Project Success. *International Journal of Project Management*, v. 6, n.3, p.77-82, ago. 1988.
- MUNNS, A. K.; BJEIRNI, B. F. The role of project management in achieving project success. *International Journal of Project Management*, v. 14, n.2, 1996, p. 81-87.
- SHENHAR, A.; LEVY, O.. Mapping the dimensions of project success. *Project Management Journal*, v. 28, n. 2, p. 5-13, jun. 1997.
- BACCARINI, D. The logical framework method for defining project success. *Project Management Journal*, v. 30, n. 4, Dec. 1999, p. 25-32.
- COOKE-DAVIES, T. The real success factors on projects. *International Journal of Project Management*. v. 20, n. 3, p. 185-190, abr. 2002.
- JUGDEV, K.; MÜLLER, R. A retrospective look at our evolving understanding of project success. *Project Management Journal*, v. 36, n. 4, p. 19-31, Dec. 2005.

I hope this contributes to this good discussion.

Stan Krupinski:¹⁰ What Wikipedia has to say

I agree with Bill's comments. Meeting all the PMBOK requirements, and then delivering something useless is silly. If you were an experienced and qualified project manager, why would you allow that to

happen? Quoting motherhood from a manual that barely covers the procedural basics, is like saying that if I gave you an HP Laptop users manual, and made you pass a multiple choice exam, then you would become a hardware and software computer expert.

Projects always have surprises [unplanned], and always have issues that cannot be directly controlled by the Project Manager. The Project Manager's job is to deal with those in order to achieve the project objectives.

Here's what Wikipedia says:

"Project management

In project management a project consists of a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result. Another definition is a management environment that is created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to a specified business case.

Project objectives define target status at the end of the project, reaching of which is considered necessary for the achievement of planned benefits. They can be formulated as SMART:¹¹ Specific, Measurable (or at least evaluable) achievement, Achievable (recently Agreed-to or Acceptable are used regularly as well), Realistic (given the current state of organizational resources) and Time terminated (bounded). The evaluation (measurement) occurs at the project closure. However a continuous guard on the project progress should be kept by monitoring and evaluating. It is also worth noting that SMART is best applied for incremental type innovation projects. For radical type projects it does not apply as well. Goals for such projects tend to be broad, qualitative, stretch/unrealistic and success driven."

Project success is based on whether or not the project delivered a value added product or service to the sponsoring organization. It is not based on whether or not the Project Manager successfully followed the PMBOK user manual.¹²

Max Wideman:¹³ Success has multiple dimensions

This discussion thread has raised some passionate arguments. For what it is worth, I agree with Bill Duncan's first post and premise – that "success" in project work has multiple dimensions. Certainly, project success and product success are not the same thing and any project manager who worries only about project success as defined by PMI and cares not for the potential product success is only doing half a job and is a poor project manager indeed.

However, in practice, product success is more difficult to measure as much of the success in this area is only seen some time after the product has been deployed. That's because success is subject to a number of variables such as market variables, public perception, to say nothing of how well the product is deployed. And by that time, of course, the outcome is well beyond the project manager's control.

[Added afterthought]

Take for example a project to build a hotel. The client selects from architectural drawings of what the building could look like. The architect, assisted by other design professionals, designs and produces

working drawings. The building is built under competitive contract to specifications provided by the designers, and on time and within budget. The project manager coordinates all of this activity.

However, the hotel does not enjoy the 80% average occupancy required for financial success. There could be a variety of factors: Location, sufficient traffic, variable demand lower than projected, uninviting staff, décor, etc., competition from other hotels in the vicinity, and so on. Bankruptcy forces the hotel to close. In these terms the "project", in the larger sense, is definitely not a success.

Can a project manager really be held accountable for the "failure" of this project? Indeed, can a project manager really foresee in the concept/planning phase (even assuming being invited to participate) that this will happen? I think not. It is not his area of expertise.

In Part 2, this discussion focuses more on seeking clarity.

¹ On LinkedIn, the "@" sign is used to identify the name of a person to whom a response is being made.

² For more information about Matthew Weaver and his work, visit his web site at www.ProjectWeavers.com. You can reach him by Email at Info@ProjectWeavers.com, or call toll free (855) 871-9246 (USA)

³ In fact if you do a Google search for "Project Success" you are likely to get over five million responses and if you search with "Defining Project Success" you could get around eleven million responses. These figures suggest that either the subject has been worn to death or there is a lot of room for differences of opinion and hence that the answer to the question is far from precise.

⁴ PMBOK® stands for the Project Management Institute's A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Now in its 5th edition, Pennsylvania, 2013.

⁵ William R. Duncan, Trainer and consultant; primary author of the 1996 PMBoK Guide, web site www.pmpartners.com. Bill Duncan may be reached by Email at wrd@pmpartners.com

⁶ Note that what Bill is saying is that "project Success" is the combination of both "Product Success" and "Project Management Success". However, "Product Success" must also be defined. If it is defined as "Meeting requirements", then well and good. However, if it is defined in terms of "Realized Benefits", these cannot be determined until considerably later, after the project has otherwise been completed, and therefore presumably beyond the project manager's responsibility.

⁷ Vince McGevna, Project/Program Manager; Author: Schedule Centered Planning: An Incremental Approach for Plan Driven Projects

⁸ Larry Moore: Project Management Professional

⁹ Andrea Giovanni Spelta: IT Management - Projects / PMO and Operations Management

¹⁰ Stan Krupinski: Project Manager

¹¹ [SK note] – These are Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) criteria

¹² Nor is it necessarily dependent on whether or not the organization successfully deployed the product and garnered the intended benefits.

¹³ Max Wideman: Well known Project Management Consultant