

Defining Project Success – Part 4

In examining project success, what have we learned?

This paper is the fourth 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 online.

The observations quoted are the opinions and property of the contributors as noted.

Published here November 2014

Editor's Note:

In Parts 1, 2 and 3 we captured what we believed to be the most valuable ideas about identifying project success as expressed in the discussion that took place on LinkedIn between February 17 and May 9, 2014. In this Part 4, we conclude by drawing out what we believe to be the essential lessons and what we believe needs to be done to remove a lot of misunderstanding when describing project management situations in terms of success.

But first here is a brief reminder of some of the key statements.

Some of the things that contributors said about success

- Project success must be measured against agreed success criteria. The baselines seldom represent real success. Bill Duncan
- If there is a feeling in the organization that the project was not a success, even if it delivered everything expected and defined – then it was not a success. Spyros Lecouras
- Note that PMBOK does not talk about "project management" success. It explicitly talks about project success. Matthew Weaver
- I define project success simply as the customer saying 'It does what I wanted. I got it on time and at the cost I said I'd pay for it'. Geoff W.
- Remember, the Project is a Temporary Endeavour. It may have a long History and a long Future, but both of these are excluded from the project. Kailash Kant
- Success is achieving an agreed upon set of outcomes. End game success may look different from what was initially proposed. The definition of "success" may change over the course of a project for a variety of reasons. Mark Moore
- The PMBoK is about project management, not product management. It is extremely difficult to predict cost and schedule when key aspects of scope are only discovered long after the initial planning.
My projects have run the gamut of working very closely with the end customers/users to having little of noting to do with them. It all depended on the products and the organizational structure. Vince McGevna
- 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.
It's all about how our projects are defined. A properly defined project must have a clear and specific completion point with which all involved parties agree. Larry Moore

If, upon completion of the project, all of the critical success factors have been met, the project is successful; there is no quibbling about this and the matter is settled.

Larry Moore

- A project manager doesn't always have the influence to dictate the best product all they can do is get the most out of whatever it is.

Ray Funck

More contributors' thoughts on project success

- Managing stakeholders' expectations is a key for the project to succeed and for the Project Manager to be successful.
Leticia Ramos
- Perception is reality. If there is a lingering feeling that the project was not a good decision, in time that will translate into the project being a failure. It is not always clear when a project is 'done'. But by definition, a project is finite so there must be an end date.
Andrzej Wardaszka
- Nobody gives you projects because you are a good project manager within the definition of PMBOK. They give you projects so that you can deliver the vision they see in their head.
Jim Khong
- Satisfied customers result when a project delivers a product that meets the needs of the customer and is useable. Schedule and cost components are important; you don't want to take forever and you don't want to break the bank, otherwise no one will be satisfied. But these components are less important to the overall determination of success if scope and customer satisfaction are achieved. Meeting schedule and cost goals enhances success, but not delivering on scope and not achieving customer satisfaction are much greater detractors to overall success than missing on schedule and cost goals.
Richard Stubbs
- I define my success as meeting the expectations of my clients.
The fact remains that if the project ends and the customer isn't happy, you still have a problem.
David Hatch
- Satisfying the clients is the prime goal of the project manager. The main question is who are those clients?
Hanoch Ben-David
- I consider three aspects for project success:
 1. Business Benefits are Realized
 2. Conditions Of Satisfaction is met as per Contract
 3. Delivery Organization Benefits are Realized.
Pallav Malhotra
- Project owners do not pursue projects for the sake of the "project". Project owners pursue projects to gain benefits.
Mounir Ajam
- Project success is the compliance of what was agreed and signed by the stakeholders. At the very beginning of the project, the project success criteria should be defined, and refined through the project life cycle. The fulfillment of these criteria is project success.

Dr. C. Colon Riollano

Confusion abounds

Reading through the contributions in this series of papers, it is clear that contributors not only often have

different interpretations of the original question but also of the project management terms being used. Principle among these appears to be the use of the word "project". Sometimes it seems that people are referring to the work of managing the project (i.e. project management) and sometimes to the project's outcome (i.e. the product or deliverable).

However, in the view of some contributors, "project" is also used to represent the much broader view of achieving some business owner or sponsor's overall business "benefit". This could be something like improved effectiveness or efficiency of operations, an increased financial return, a change in operating mode, even a change in culture of the organization. Obviously, there are many possible beneficial outcomes to be achieved.

We suggest that as a professional discipline, we should be advocating for the use of specific meanings applied to our project management technical terms. If we want terms such as "project" to represent broader concepts, then we should review, revise and update the definitions of those terms accordingly. Alternatively, to avoid the confusion, we should find new labels to represent these alternative views. Anything less certainly falls short of "best practice"!

The meaning of the word "project"

So to start with, let us examine some of these problematic definitions. First, of course, is the term "project" as we have just mentioned. According to the latest PMBOK® Guide, a project is:¹

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

This definition is very broad and could be interpreted as applying to a wide range of activities. The "temporary endeavor" and "result" could span from simply responding to, and submitting, an examination paper, to something more enduring like collecting data and creating a paper like this one. There is no indication of the size, scope and complexity of the effort involved, especially in the case of "large" projects and in different "areas of application".

Of course a number of more elaborate definitions have been proposed over the years, but we think that the definition presented in the original 1987 Body of Knowledge is more informative. It reads as follows:²

"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."

This definition clearly identifies a project life span with a start and a defined finish. It also highlights some of the principle challenges involved in accomplishing a typical project. Either way, the intent is that the project goes no further than the delivery of a product (service or result).

Why do we think this is one of the better definitions? Because it does not preclude front-end stage-gated phases but it does conclude with the delivery (and transfer) of the product. This is consistent with most formal external contracts as well as informal internal understandings. And why is this so in practice? Because the next phase in the life cycle of the product falls under operations management that requires a different style of management and a different mind set.

The meaning of the term "Project Management"

While we are at it, we should also look at the definition of project management. According to PMBOK,

project management is:³

"The application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements."

This definition is not terribly helpful, but it does make it clear that project management is the work of managing the activities involved in a project. Once again we think that the definition presented in the original 1987 Body of Knowledge is more informative. It reads as follows:⁴

"The art of directing and coordinating human and material resources throughout the life of a project by using modern management techniques to achieve predetermined objectives of scope, quality, time and cost, and participant satisfaction."

This definition is interesting because it raises the issue of "scope". Scope itself is problematic because it could be either or both of "project scope" and/or "product scope". "Project scope" speaks to the range of responsibility of the project manager. That is to say, the boundaries of the project that could be anywhere from simple time and cost parameters to interrogating all the principle stakeholders and analyzing the findings to establish what would make them satisfied in the end result.

Nevertheless, none of the definitions encompass responsibility for garnering any benefits that might accrue from making actual use of the "product, service or result". Therefore none reflect any worldview of the projects environment such as consequential beneficial business outcomes. In short, under these definitions, the project manager is not responsible for the subsequent use of the project deliverables. Indeed, these definitions do not even contemplate the correct or most suitable projects to undertake in the first place. So, by the same token, the project manager is not responsible for this part of the work either.

However, both of these statements may be nullified, but only if the work of either or both is specifically included in the project manager's terms of reference for a given project. In other words, these activities are not typical and must therefore be written into the project manager's charter in the first place. If all of this is true, then perhaps we should dig a little deeper. First consider Program Management.

The meaning of "Program Management"

According to the PMBOK guide, program management is:⁵

"A group of related projects, subprograms, and program activities managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually."

Again for comparison, the original 1987 Body of Knowledge is more informative. Program management is:⁶

"The management of a related series of projects executed over a broad period of time, and which are designed to accomplish broad goals, to which the individual projects contribute."

Other definitions abound, depending on different corporate environments and the areas of project management application. True, that the first definition of program management here mentions "benefits", but these are benefits derived from the more efficient use of the resources required for doing the projects. Even though program management may be viewed as one step higher than project management, none of the definitions trespass on the organization's operational work of garnering the benefits arising from the resulting products.

As an aside here, one might well ask: "What about the work of creating the resulting product, i.e. the

deliverable(s)?" In the project sense, this is the work of "technology management" and requires people who are competent working in the technology or technologies pertaining to the project. This extensive field is specifically *excluded* from the PMBOK guide. The PMBOK guide states:⁷

"The PMBOK® Guide describes only the project management processes. Although product-oriented processes are outside the scope of this document, they should not be ignored by the project manager and project team. Project management processes and product-oriented processes overlap and interact throughout the life of the project."

In other words, management of the project and management of the technology are two different things that nevertheless proceed in lockstep. Unfortunately, this distinction is not always clearly understood by many project management practitioners.

Because most organizations contemplate running more than one project at a time, deployment of limited resources is an issue as suggested in our definition of a project earlier. These "resources" encompass both project management resources but also resources required for creating the product. Indeed, the latter situation is often the most contentious. Among other duties, program management, as in a "PMO", is often the best place to establish priorities and provide the necessary project governance.

"Project Portfolio Management"

So far, we have project management producing new "products, services or results" via new projects, and we have program management orchestrating multiple projects and all that this involves. Who then are the recipients of these "products, services or results"? The answer is operational management, or "operations". However, "operations" is the core activity of most organizations and it can be demonstrated that this activity is, in many respects, very different from project management. Consequently, the larger the organization, the more necessary it is to have some structure that bridges the difference between projects and operations. That is, from converting corporate strategy into projects, to garnering benefits from the resulting products.

So, going a step even higher, enter project portfolio management.⁸ The PMBOK guide defines project portfolio management as:⁹

"The centralized management of one or more portfolios to achieve strategic objectives."

This definition appears to be circular. TenStep Inc. provides a more informative definition by defining project portfolio management as:¹⁰

"A collection of projects or programs and 'Other Work' that are grouped together to facilitate effective management of that work to meet strategic business objectives. The projects or programs of the portfolio may not necessarily be interdependent or directly related."

Both these definitions embody the concept of achieving strategic objectives that, in turn, implies garnering actual benefits from deploying the products of the programs and projects.

So there we have it. We suggest that:

- If we want to talk about the effectiveness or efficiency of the delivery of new "products, services or results", then let's use the term "**Project Success**". This is the responsibility of the project manager.
- If we want to talk about the realized value of a particular product at any time, then use the term "**Product Success**". This is the responsibility of the technology manager.¹¹
- If we want to talk about delivering a product within scope, quality, time and cost parameters,

then use the term "**Project Management Success**". This is the responsibility of the project manager with support from the project's sponsor.

- If we want to talk about the successful creation of a product to specification, and its transfer of ownership to operations, followed by successful usage, then talk about "**Program Success**". This is the responsibility of the program manager.
- If we want to talk about the successful choice of a product, service or result, its creation, delivery, and deployment, together with the garnering of real benefits to the organization responsible, then talk about "**Project Portfolio Management Success**". This is the responsibility of the project portfolio manager.¹²

We should not forget that the term "success" itself is a multifaceted construct and the perception of success from one person's perspective may well be different from any others. Thus, the five perspectives of a project as listed above are very unlikely to be unanimous. Nevertheless, if we were to use the suggested or similar differentiating terms, we suspect that we would have much less trouble in accepting the apparent conflict between hearing about project successes, subsequently followed by product failures.¹³

Editor's concluding remarks

We hope you have enjoyed the fallout from the original discussion and also found these summaries both informative and useful.

¹ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 2013, Glossary, p553

² *Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 1987, Glossary, p22

³ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 2013, Glossary, p554

⁴ *Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 1987, Glossary, p22

⁵ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 2013, Glossary, p553

⁶ *Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 1987, Glossary, p21

⁷ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 2013, p48

⁸ Note that "portfolio management" must be prefixed by the word "project" to distinguish this discipline from well-established "Financial Portfolio Management".

⁹ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition*, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 2013, Glossary, p551

¹⁰ See TenStep Inc.'s web site at <http://www.portfoliostep.com>

¹¹ On smaller projects, the role of project manager and technology manager are often combined, with technology manager predominating.

¹² The "project portfolio manager" role is often vested in a committee of senior management executives, lead by a PPfM chairman.

¹³ Perhaps better expressed as "product portfolio failure".