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Five Project Success Factors:
How the discipline of project management improves your odds.

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Abstract

Our work – at home, school, and on the job – is increasingly composed of projects. That's why interest in project management has exploded over the past fifteen years. Project management is a sophisticated discipline that can take years to master. This article gives you the shortcut: Five Project Success Factors that apply to every project in every industry.

Introduction

Our workplace is increasingly composed of projects. Product development. Process improvement. Fundraising and marketing campaigns. System deployments. Do you *change, build, create, design, improve*, or *innovate*? If you do, then you work on projects, and chances are those projects have demanding deadlines, complex communication channels, and a limited budget with unlimited expectations.

What Makes It So Difficult?

Few projects are easy. Even when the technology is proven, the requirements are clear, and the budget is sufficient we can still stumble – turning what ought to be a routine deployment or upgrade into a nail-biting nightmare. What makes delivering projects so challenging? The answer is found in the definition of project: *work that is temporary and produces a unique product or service*.[1]

There are a number of challenges associated with managing work that is both temporary and unique:

- *Staffing*. As the project has a start and a finish, so does the project team. The more unique the project, the greater the difficulty in assembling a team with the appropriate skill mix.

- *Budgeting*. Most budget cycles are set to reflect accounting cycles. But projects are driven by other factors, and often can't wait for the next budgeting cycle. Or the project can be years long, spanning multiple accounting cycles.

- *Authority*. When "politics" gets in the way of project progress, we usually mean that the organization's authority structures aren't serving the project. That's not surprising, given that projects often require cooperation and participation across the normal functional boundaries within the firm.

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There are a number of challenges associated with managing work that is both temporary and unique.

- *Estimating*. We estimate new deadlines and budgets before a project can be approved. But given that estimating requires forecasting the future, these cost and schedule goals are often built on more assumptions than facts. The project team is being asked to create something *unique*; that means it will solve new problems and encounter unexpected obstacles. Even projects that are similar to previous efforts can be difficult to forecast because most projects contain so many variables.

- *Communication*. If people are the engine of accomplishing work, communication is the heart of true productivity. Projects that require cooperative, concerted effort from temporary, cross-functional project teams must re-create basic communication channels on every project.

Managing one project can be a challenge. Now multiply that challenge in every company or department that oversees multiple projects. Imagine a marketing firm or Information Technology department that has ten, twenty, or fifty projects under way. Each project has its own risks, stakeholders, communication channels and resource requirements. It is easy to see how a seemingly routine project can become incredibly complex in a multi-project environment.

The good news is that the project management discipline addresses the challenges of individual projects, and continues to evolve to address the problems faced by project based organizations. Project management is a big field, and it encompasses many concepts and techniques.

This article is designed to get anyone started improving the results of their projects. We'll examine five project success factors and one powerful technique that applies on every project.

A Vision of Success

Before reading further take this test: visualize the best project you have worked on. *Best project* usually means that it was successful in terms of cost and schedule goals and that the customer found the outcome useful. On top of that, it was an experience you'd gladly repeat. With this best project clearly in mind, write down the factors that made it so good – what was happening on the project that made it so successful? Have you got your list? Now read on!

I've given this test to literally thousands of professionals who work on projects in industries

Your Project Success Factors

1._____

2._____

3._____

4._____

5._____

from aerospace to information technology to healthcare. Of the hundreds of factors they've identified, five factors crop up with overwhelming regularity.[2]

1. **Agreement on the goals of the project.** The customer, management, team and project manager had a clear understanding of what they wanted to accomplish and why.

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Five project success factors crop up on a regular basis.

2. **A plan that will be used to measure progress during the project.** This plan is both a cohesive description of an overall strategy and detailed enough to show clear responsibilities and specific accomplishments.

3. **Constant, effective communication among everyone involved in the project.** Probably the single most cited cause of project failure is 'poor communication.' Effective communication means putting the channels in place that keep all the right people informed at the right time.

4. **A controlled scope.** Project scope is all the work required to complete the project's objectives. Controlling scope means that we make sure that all the required work is accomplished, but no more. No extra features, no extra services – unless the new feature or service comes with additional budget or schedule allowance.

5. **Management support.** Timely decisions and sufficient resources are the two most cited examples of management support. Project teams and project managers don't have enough authority to make all the decisions they need to get the project accomplished. They need cooperative, involved management.

Did you identify any or all of these factors for yourself? More importantly, do you have them on every project? The project management discipline provides a systematic approach that every project can follow to achieve these five success factors.

Improve Your Odds: Use a Systematic Approach

The Quality Management discipline has taught us that consistent processes produce consistent results. Figure 1 illustrates a project management process that can be applied to any project. As we will see, each function contributes to the five project success factors.

The diagram in Figure 1 represents an *iterative* process. Each of the functions takes place repeatedly, throughout the life of a project. For example, although *definition* will precedes *planning*, the outcome of planning may cause the project manager to re-visit certain definition activities. In the same way, monitoring and controlling a project will lead to updates in the plan. This cycle should become more apparent as we examine the model in greater detail.
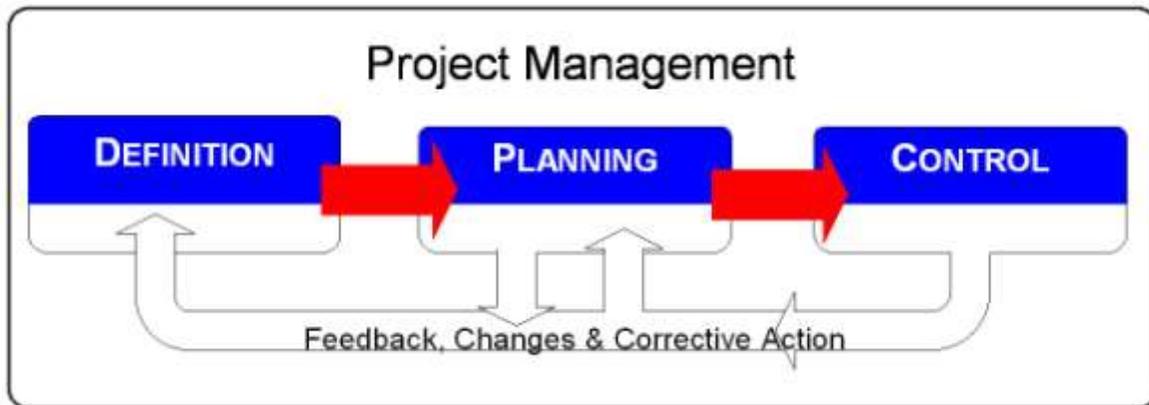
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Figure 1

Definition. Once a project is selected, a project manager is assigned and goes to work building the foundation for the project's success. Project definition activities include the following:

- Identify all stakeholders on the project and document their goals and involvement. Stakeholders include customers, vendors, core team members and supporting management within the firm.

- Develop a relationship with the project sponsor. A sponsor is an executive within the organization who is responsible for the success of the project. While the project manager performs the day-to-day oversight of the project, the sponsor provides the executive authority necessary to overcome organizational obstacles.

- Record the goals and constraints of the project using a statement of work or similar document. Goals and constraints can include the scope, budget, key schedule milestones, authority structure for the project, measures of success, communication standards, and other facts or assumptions that will affect the project. This document forms the agreement between stakeholders that guides the project team.

Project definition is the foundation for success because it establishes a common understanding of the goals and constraints of the project. Without it, the project team is shooting at a moving target. Through the activities of project definition we begin to build all five of the project success factors.

Planning. With a clear goal in place the project manager builds the action plan that describes the who, what, and when of accomplishing the project. Figure 2 represents a common planning graphic that includes all of this information. Planning typically includes the following activities:

- Develop a detailed description of the work on the project using a *work breakdown structure* (WBS). The WBS breaks the overall work of the project into small, individual tasks, much the same way an organization chart for a company breaks down authority. The work breakdown structure is evident in Figure 2.

- Use the individual tasks from the work breakdown structure as the basis for scheduling the work, setting specific due dates and assigning clear responsibilities.

- Determine the overall number of people on the team and what skills are necessary. For part-time team members, identify the dates their skills and effort are required. Staffing the project team often requires negotiating

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with other project managers or functional managers.

- Prepare contracts for vendors who are participating on the project.

The old saying is that 'the devil is in the details.' Clearly, building a plan provides the details for assigning clear responsibility and monitoring progress. Project planning also affects all five project success factors. Planning clarifies goals because it breaks high level goals into detailed actions. The detailed plan becomes the basis for communicating with the team, management and customer. Scope is easier to control because it has been so completely defined. All together these elements make it easier to positively engage management and to get their support.

Control. The control function can be likened to driving a car: the driver monitors their vehicle and the environment, intentionally steers toward the destination, and takes corrective action as obstacles or unexpected events arise. For project managers, driving the project includes:

- Monitor the progress of the project against the plan. Projects are typically too large for subjective assessments of progress to be valuable. Instead, we need specific measurements, such as the percent of the budget consumed to date. The detailed nature of the project plan allows for detailed measurements of cost and schedule progress.

We can see which tasks are late, which are early and which are consuming more or less effort than was estimated.

- Communicate with the project team and stakeholders. Since life and projects rarely go as planned, continuous, purposeful communication is necessary to keep all project participants informed and working together in harmony.

- Form the project team and attend to its health. Forming the team means assembling a disparate group of people into a team with a shared goal. Consciously build and maintain trusting relationships within the team.

- Be vigilant about potential changes to requirements or project scope and ensure all changes are approved before they are acted upon.

- Take corrective action to keep the project on track.

The five success factors permeate project control: manage from the plan, communicate, control changes, re-plan, and always keep an eye on the goal.

If consistent processes yield consistent results, project managers with a disciplined, systematic approach to managing each project will increase the odds of success for all projects.
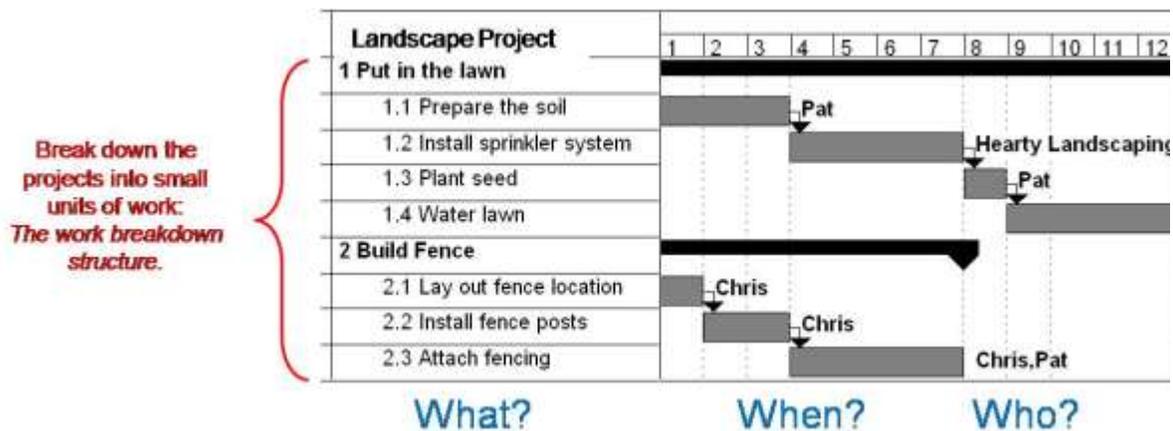

Landscape Project	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Put in the lawn												
1.1 Prepare the soil			Pat									
1.2 Install sprinkler system								Hearty Landscaping				
1.3 Plant seed									Pat			
1.4 Water lawn												
2 Build Fence												
2.1 Lay out fence location	Chris											
2.2 Install fence posts		Chris										
2.3 Attach fencing			Chris,Pat									

Break down the projects into small units of work: *The work breakdown structure.*

What?   When?   Who?

Figure 2

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One Powerful Project Management Technique

The foundation of successful planning and project control is a clear understanding of what should be happening on a day-to-day basis. There are many proven techniques within the project management discipline that provide a grasp of the details. Let's take a look at one in particular: the *work breakdown structure* or WBS. (See Figure 2).

The WBS is simple, yet extremely powerful. Its importance derives from the inherent challenge of projects: since each project is unique, there will always be a unique set of tasks to plan and perform. The WBS breaks down a project from one large, unique, bundle of work into many discrete, manageable tasks. No matter how large or small a project, the power of the this technique is the way it gives us a handle on the details at the same time it organizes the big picture.

The WBS Improves Your Odds

A solid WBS is just one of the many tools and techniques in the project management discipline, yet this one technique influences all five of the project success factors.

1. **Clear goals.** Sometimes everyone thinks they agree on the big-picture goals but when reality hits we hear "I didn't realize the project would entail all this work!" The WBS transforms the goals into manageable actions and provides a stronger basis for making commitments.

2. **A detailed plan.** The WBS is the foundation of the action plan.

3. **Constant, effective communication.** Clear, descriptive tasks make assigning work and reporting progress more meaningful.

4. **A controlled scope.** The WBS is the definitive description of project scope. The stronger the initial understanding of project scope, the easier it is to manage changes.

5. **Management support.** The top-down nature of the WBS makes it meaningful to both management and team members.

A good WBS won't guarantee success. The five success factors won't guarantee success. But they do turn the odds in your favor. Given the challenging nature of projects, that is an edge you can't afford to ignore.

Summary

In this article we've recognized that the nature of projects – each one is temporary and unique – poses challenges that are addressed by the discipline of project management. With a systematic approach to clarifying the goals and constraints of a project, creating a detailed plan, and managing from that plan, we improve communication, management support, and ultimately the chance for project success. Whether your project is at home, work, or school, the Five Project Success Factors apply. Learn and apply the discipline of project management and not only will your productivity increase, you'll have more fun on projects!

Eric Verzuh is president of The Versatile Company, a project management training firm. He is also the best selling author of *The Fast Forward MBA in Project Management, 3rd ed* and *The Portable MBA in Project Management*, published by John Wiley & Sons. Contact him at Eric.Verzuh@Versatilecompany.com.