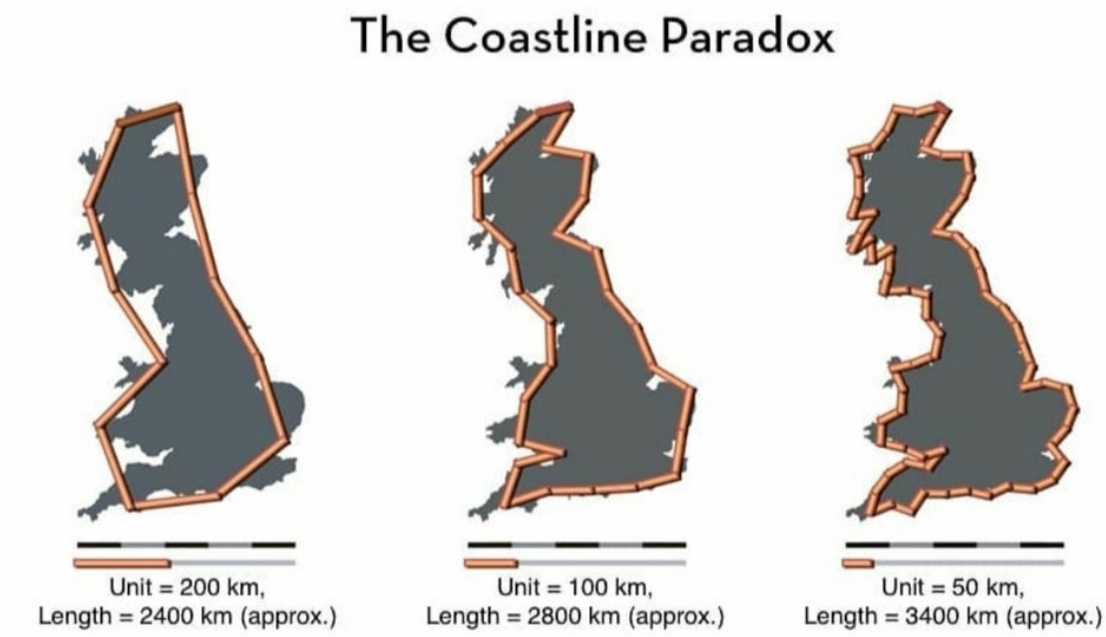
The Planning Paradox
How much detail is too much?

What does *The Coastline Paradox* have to do with your projects?

How much detail is too much? Traditional views tend to favour a management approach built on the assumption that more detail is better—and to a point, this is undoubtedly correct. Insufficient detail in a plan of any type is a sure way to fail; 'just do it' at the overall project level does not help.

But looking at the *coastline paradox* and using the length of a coastline as a synonym for the duration of a project suggests there is a point where too much detail is counterproductive.

The coastline paradox states that as you increase the detail by using smaller units of measure, the measured length of the coastline increases. If you use a small enough unit of measure, the length becomes infinite (for a more detailed explanation see *The Coastline Paradox Explained*[1]).



If the coastline of Great Britain is measured using units of 100 km (62 mi) long, then the length of the coastline is approximately 2,800 km (1,700 mi). With 50 km (31 mi) units, the total length is approximately 3,400 km (2,100 mi), approximately 600 km (370 mi) longer.

So, what does this mean for project controls and project management? No one navigating a ship into a UK port would be happy using a map where the smallest measurement was 50km. Significantly more detail is needed, but they do not need absolutely *everything* about their intended destination. What's needed is

[1] The Coastline Paradox Explained: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coastline_paradox

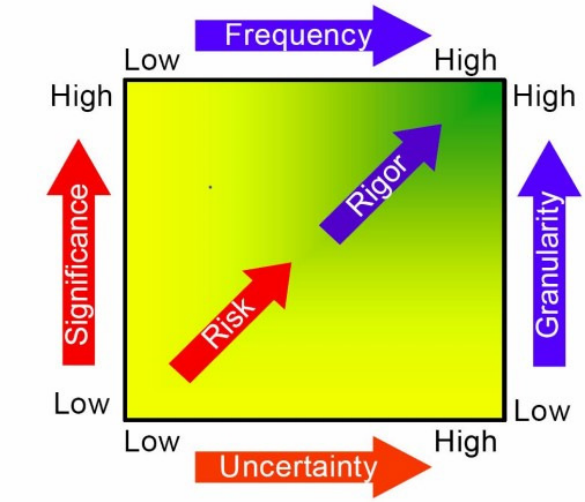
useful information at an appropriate level of detail. The same goes for you when navigating your car in a strange city[2]:

Figure 13. Which image of North Sydney is more useful for driving to the Dojo? Accurate, fully detailed and useful are different concepts.

Finessing project plans to present useful information at the right level of detail is not easy—decisions have to be made!

Take a typical risk register. If you tried listing every conceivable risk, the document would emulate the coastline paradox and be of almost infinite length, which means the register is never finished and the project does not start. Conversely, miss one or two significant risks and the project team may have a very unpleasant experience, possibly causing the project to fail. Pragmatic guidelines about the risks to be considered are needed, and these have to be tailored to the project.

Similar guidelines are needed for the degree of detail to include in the schedule, cost plan and all of the other sub-plans needed for a project. This involves balancing the factors shown below:



[2] Image source: ***Understanding Design, The challenge of informed consent***: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF_Papers/P186-Understanding_Design.pdf

As the risk environment increases, the project controls need to be more rigorous. The risk environment is influenced by:

- The size or significance of the identified risks, and
- The degree of uncertainty associated with the work, where the project sits along the spectrum between well understood routine work, and something entirely new?

As either (or both) of these factors increase, the controls systems need to be more rigorous.

The two factors that influence the degree of rigour in the controls system are the amount of detail included (granularity) and the frequency of the monitoring, reviewing and updating of the plans. But, as suggested above, too much detail will increase costs and reduce efficiency and effectiveness.

There's no right answer to this paradox, what's best depends on the skills of the control team, the culture of the organisation, and the nature of the risks. What matters is thinking through these questions, deciding on a strategy and then reviewing the decisions based on experience.

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