

GAPPS PROGRAM TYPOLOGY

Definition of a program

The term *program* has been defined in many different ways. For example:

- “A temporary, flexible organisation structure created to coordinate, direct and oversee the implementation of a set of related projects and activities in order to deliver outcomes and benefits related to an organisation’s strategic objectives; a programme is likely to have a life that spans several years.” (*Managing Successful Programmes*, UK Office of Government Commerce, 2007)
- “A programme is a set of related projects and organisational changes put in place to achieve a strategic goal and to deliver the benefits that the organisation expects.” (*IPMA Competence Baseline*, International Project Management Association, 2006)
- “A group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits and control not available from managing them individually. Programs may include elements of related work outside the scope of the discrete projects in the program.” (*The Standard for Program Management*, Project Management Institute, 2008; adapted from *The Handbook of Project-Based Management*, J. Rodney Turner, 1992)

Other definitions of program tend to be conceptually similar to these three: all recognize that a program is expected to actually deliver benefits (rather than just create the potential for benefits), and all recognize the existence of multiple, discrete projects within a program.

The definitions are all close enough in meaning that it is not necessary to choose one in order to understand what a program is.

Types of Programs

Programs and program management span a wide range of undertakings:

- Development or expansion of a major transportation system such as a subway or an urban highway
- Implementation of an Enterprise Resource Planning system and the supporting policies, processes, and procedures
- NASA’s Mission to Mars
- Organizational change to implement a new corporate strategy
- Projects done for health care clients by an engineering consulting firm
- Regional activities of an oil and gas extraction company
- Major weapons system acquisition
- Crisis response
- Information Technology (IT) department support for a single line function such as sales or engineering

And some key characteristics of programs often vary considerably:

- Program manager’s authority to originate or terminate projects
- Degree of integration with the sponsoring organization
- How the sponsoring organization will evaluate the program manager’s performance

- Number of projects
- Interdependence of projects
- Similarity of technical disciplines
- How the program is initiated and the criteria for termination

To determine the impact of these differences, GAPPS developed a typology of programs based largely on the work of Sergio Pellegrinelli (IJPM, 2005) and Alan Stretton (unpublished review of program management literature, 2007).

Program Characteristic	Type of Program			
	Strategic Program	Operational Program	Multi-project Program	Mega-project
General Purpose	Deliver assets and benefits that are directly linked to attaining the sponsoring organization's desired future state	Deliver assets and benefits that are critical to the sponsoring organization's day-to-day operations	Achieve synergies from projects with common traits such as shared resources, similar clients, or product technology	Deliver a specific asset to the sponsoring organization
Key Differentiating Feature	Link to a specific business goal or strategic initiative	Relative interdependence of constituent projects	Relative independence of constituent projects	Significantly larger than the sponsoring organization's typical projects
Reason for Grouping Projects	Early results influence decisions about later projects	Minimize negative impact on ongoing operations	Benefits expected from synergy	So much larger than the organization's typical projects

GAPPS Program Typology

Further analysis and extensive discussion with program managers led to the following conclusions:

- The role of the program manager is fundamentally the same for strategic programs, operational programs, and multi-project programs: the type of program does not affect the role.
- Although a mega-project is often called a program, the role of the manager of a mega-project is substantially different from that of the managers of the other program types. As a result, the role of mega-project manager is *not* covered by this framework.
- Multi-project programs are often similar to project portfolios. However, the role of project portfolio manager is different enough that most project portfolio managers will not be able to satisfy program manager performance criteria. As a result, there is no need for a rigorous distinction between the two.