



Project Services Pty Ltd

# PROJECT FACT OR FICTION

( Will the Real Projects Please Stand Up )

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## MAXIMISING PROJECT VALUE

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## ABSTRACT

The definition of “projects” used by almost every authority is an inclusive definition; for example:

- **PMBOK® Guide:** *a project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result*
- **ISO 21500 and 21500:** *[a] temporary endeavour created to produce agreed deliverables (where deliverables means a: unique and verifiable, tangible or intangible outcome of a planned activity).*

Both of these definitions can apply equally well to genuine projects, other endeavours (Paul C. Dinsmore ‘*Everything in business is a project or project-related*’<sup>1</sup>) and to processes that are definitely not projects.

Before the true value of projects to an enterprise can be properly assessed and the responsibilities of a Project Manager defined, the definition of *a project* must be tightened so that endeavours that are not projects are excluded as effectively as endeavours that are projects are included. The definition of *a project* proposed in this paper is: ***A structured group of people, temporarily established to accomplish an objective, under the leadership of a person (or people) nominated to fulfil the role of project manager.***

The effects of this definition of a project include:

1. Recognising the fact projects do not occur naturally in nature; they are created by people organising into a group or team with a defined purpose of delivering an outcome by applying project management to the endeavour (there are many other options).
2. Where the stakeholder group choose to buy into a projectized process, they also *ipso facto* agree to accept the processes and disciplines imposed by the project manager.
3. The vital importance of people in the overall project management process is recognised.

Under the enhanced definition proposed in this paper, a project can only exist if its stakeholder community agrees to set up a team (temporary organisation), managed by a project manager. The outcome to be expected from bringing people directly into the definition and formation of a project, as described in this paper, is to ensure more projects deliver to their full potential to the benefit of their host organisations and the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul C. Dinsmore *Winning In Business With Enterprise Project Management* (©American Management Association - 1999).



## INTRODUCTION

Good definitions are short and unambiguous and are essential for almost every aspect of life. Even something as simple as ordering a snack requires a clear understanding of what's required – this understanding is the basis of a definition. For example, doughnuts and bagels have a lot in common, they are both round and have a hole (a torus), and are made from dough but they are very different commodities! If you need a bagel for breakfast or a doughnut for your coffee everyone involved in the transaction needs to understand your requirements if your expectations are to be fulfilled.



The simple fact is if you cannot define something precisely, you have real problems explaining what it is, what it does and what value it offers. This lack of understanding seems to be a key challenge facing the project management community (by the way, the bagel is on the left..... the other picture is a Krispy Kreme donut).

Definitions serve two interlinked purposes; they describe the subject of the definition in sufficient detail to allow the concept to be recognised and understood and they exclude similar 'concepts' that do not fit the definition. Definitions do not explain the subject, merely define it.

Way back in 2002 we suggested the definition of a *project* was flawed. Almost any temporary work organised to achieve an objective could fit into almost all of the definitions then currently in use – unfortunately not much has changed since. PMI's definition of a 'project' is still a: *temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result*. This definition is imprecise, for example, a football team engaged in a match is involved in:

- *A temporary endeavour* – the match lasts a defined time.
- *Undertaken to create a unique result* – the papers are full of results on the weekend and each match is unique.
- *Undertaken to create a unique product or service* – the value is in the entertainment provided to fans, either as a 'product' (using a marketing perspective) or as a service to the team's fans – no two matches are the same (which is the attraction of sport).

Add in elements from other definitions of a project such as a '*defined start and end*', '*planned sequence of activities*', etcetera and you still fail to clearly differentiate a team engaged in a project from a football team engaged in a match; but no-one considers a game of football a project. Football captains may be team leaders, but they are not project managers.



The definition we proposed in 2002 looked at the social and stakeholder aspects of a project and arrived at an augmented description: *A project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result which the relevant stakeholders agree shall be managed as a project.* This definition would clearly exclude the football team engaged in a match unless everyone of significance decided to treat the match as a project but this definition still suffers from a number of weaknesses, our updated definition is defined below.

## WHAT IS A PROJECT (& WHY DOES IT MATTER)?

### Why Definitions are Important

Project Managers and the process of project management are approaching a crossroad in the evolution of our discipline. Decisions made in the next few years may, on one hand, see project management fade back into general management leaving a few specialist support roles behind (eg, scheduling), or on the other, see the emergence of a true, separate and dynamic profession. The authors of this paper strongly support the latter view and believe the emergence of Project Management as a true profession will contribute significantly to the creation of wealth and delivery of real benefits to businesses and communities. However, achieving the status of a true profession will require significant forward movement in a range of areas, not the least of which is refining the definition of *a project* and *project management*.

Defining *project management* is relatively easy (based on the current way project definitions are structured), definitions include:

- *The application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements. PMBOK® Guide*
- *Project Management is the discipline of managing projects successfully. APM-BOK (UK)<sup>2</sup>*
- *Planning, monitoring and control of all aspects of a project and the motivation of all those involved in it to achieve the project objectives on time and to the specified cost, quality and performance. BS 6079-2:2000<sup>3</sup>*
- *Coordinated activities to direct and control the accomplishment of agreed [project] deliverables. ISO<sup>4</sup>*

The problem with these definitions is that for *project management* to be defined, *a project* needs to be clearly and unambiguously defined. As we will demonstrate later in this paper, the current definition of *a project* is far from unambiguous.

One important reason, among many, for needing a clear definition of *a project* (and as a consequence *project management*) is to allow the successes and failures of the process to be properly defined. There have been numerous studies over the last few years generating sensational headlines claiming 80% of IT projects fail, \$Billions are lost annually on failed projects (ref: Standish Group, KPMG, et al). If one accepts Paul Dinsmore's view that *'Everything in business is a project or project-related'* then these claims are undoubtedly correct. However, if a tighter definition of *a project* is adopted, then failures of other endeavours undertaken by business will be separated from the success (and/or failure)

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<sup>2</sup> Association for Project Management – Body of Knowledge 4th Edition. ©Association for Project Management, UK.

<sup>3</sup> British Standard 6079-2:2000, Vocabulary. ©British Standards Institute Publications, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> ISO 21500 and 21502.



of projects, the true worth of projects can be established and the profession of project management can be built on a firm foundation. The alternative is for project management to slowly fade back into general management; its irrelevance reinforced by mediocrity and generalisation.

### Problems with the Current Definitions of “a Project”

Almost all of the current definitions of a *project* are inclusive definitions. What we mean by this is that whilst every project exhibits all of the characteristics included in the definitions, the characteristics can be found in many other endeavours and in many processes that are definitely not projects. The most widely used definition of a project is: ‘A temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result’.

This definition clearly applies to every project but can equally well apply to almost any other endeavour from getting the kids to school in the morning, to cooking an evening meal, to (as Dinsmore correctly points out) almost ‘everything in business’. Whilst the authors are happy to accept all and any of these endeavours MAY be a project, we are not prepared to accept that they are ALL projects on EVERY occasion.

Some two and a half thousand years ago, Socrates developed an effective process for questioning widely held beliefs (ie, common sense) to arrive at a better understanding of the true situation. Below, we use the Socratic method of thinking to compare one of the examples of this type of analysis contained in Alain de Botton’s book ‘*The Consolations of Philosophy*’<sup>5</sup> with a review of the current definitions of a *project*.

The discussion of courage is reported to have taken place between Socrates and two Greek Generals (Nicias and Laches) sometime after the battle of Plataea in 479 BC. In this battle, the Greek army had initially retreated (to cause the enemy to break ranks) before courageously defeating the Persians.

The Socratic method of thinking		
Stages in the Analysis	As applied to courage	As applied to “a project”
1 Locate a statement confidently described as common sense	Acting courageously involves not retreating in battle.	A project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result.
2 Imagine for a moment the statement is false – search for situations or contexts where the statement would not be true	Could one ever be courageous and yet retreat in battle? Could one ever stay firm in battle and yet not be courageous?	Is preparing the children for school a project? Is attending a business briefing a project?
3 If an exception is found, the definition is either imprecise or false.	It is possible to be courageous in battle and retreat. It is possible to stay firm in battle and not be courageous.	Not every temporary endeavor undertaken to create a result is a project.

<sup>5</sup> Alain de Botton *The Consolations of Philosophy* (Penguin Books). © Alain de Botton, 2000.



4 The initial statement must be modified to take the exception into account.	Acting courageously can involve both retreat and advance in battle.	<i>For the author's suggestion, refer discussions below!</i>
5 If one subsequently finds exceptions to the improved statement, the process should be repeated.		

As already outlined, the current definitions of *a project* all use similar terms, all of which are all process-focused and all of which are essential for the formation of a project but (we suggest) do not of themselves guarantee the endeavor is a project. The existing definitions of “a project” include the following characteristics:

1. Projects are temporary and unique although, as the *PMBOK* points out, this does not preclude repetitive processes (eg building identically designed speculative houses) from being individual projects or parts of a larger project.
2. Projects have a defined beginning and end.
3. Projects involve separate activities that are coordinated with date/time constraints for their performance.
4. Projects utilise resources.
5. Projects are created to achieve/deliver a predetermined product, service, result or objective.

However, every time someone sets out to cook a meal, send the children to school or attend a conference all of the above conditions are likely to be present and most of the time the endeavour is not thought of as a project by any of the participants.

In the authors' experience, most people have no difficulty knowing when they are working on a project and knowing when they are working on some other form of endeavor. So, how can the current definition of *a project* be enhanced to provide a better match with the observed knowledge of most project participants?

Following the Socratic approach used above, an improved definition must be tested for precision and completeness.

- Can a project exist if many of the relevant stakeholders do not know (or agree) that it shall be managed as a project? Probably not, the *PMBOK* and other standards and methodologies require a range of techniques to be used as a part of the process of ‘managing as a project’ including defining scope, preparing plans, etc. If project management processes are not followed (ie, the endeavour is not ‘managed as a project’), some other form of accomplishment is being used and therefore the endeavour is not a project.
- Can an endeavour be accomplished using some other process? The answer to this question is obviously yes; many things are accomplished by people every day without any reference to ‘projects’ and project management techniques.
- Can project management techniques be used on endeavours that are not projects? Again, the obvious answer is yes. Anyone can prepare a schedule, etc., but the ad hoc use of techniques will not create a project.



## Updating the definition

Since 2002 there has been a significant amount of academic work undertaken that looks at how projects really function which may provide the basis for a better definition of a project. The key area of research has been focused on describing projects as temporary organisations that need governing and managing; either as a standalone organisation involving actors from many different ‘permanent organisations’ such as the group of people assembled on a construction site, or as a temporary organisation within a larger organisation such as an internal project team (particularly cross-functional project teams). The research suggests that all projects are undertaken by temporary teams that are assembled to undertake the work and then dissipate at the end of the project.

My feeling is recognising the concept of a project as a particular type of temporary organisation provides the basis for a precise and unambiguous definition of *a project*. But on its own this is insufficient – whilst every project involves a temporary organisation, many temporary organisations are not involved in projects.

Another fundamental problem with the basic *PMBOK* definition is the concept of an ‘endeavour’. The definition of endeavour used as a noun is: an attempt to achieve a goal; used as a verb is: try hard to do or achieve something. But, ‘making an effort to do something’ is completely intangible; projects involve people! Hitting a nail with a hammer is an endeavour to drive it into a piece of wood but this information is not a lot of use on its own; you need to know who is endeavouring to drive the nail and for what purpose?

If the only tool you have  
is a hammer, **you tend to  
see every problem as a  
nail**



Abraham Maslow

Another issue is the focus on outputs – a product service or result; the output is not the project; the project is the work needed to create the output. Once the output is finished, the project ceases to exist! A building project is the work involved in creating the building, once the building is finished it is a building, not a project. But confronted with the need to create a new building different people will create different projects to achieve similar results:

- One organisation may choose to create two projects, one to design the building, another to construct it
- A different organisation may choose to create a single ‘design and construct’ project
- Another organisation may simply treat the work as ‘business as usual’.



The scope of the work involved in any particular project is determined by its stakeholders – projects are a construct created by people for their mutual convenience, not by some immutable fact of nature.

## A concise definition of a project

Unpacking the elements involved in a project we find:

- A temporary organisation is always involved, but not all temporary organisations are project teams.
- Projects cause a change by creating something new or different – this objective defines the work to be accomplished and usually includes constraints such as the time and money available for the work. These requirements and scope of work included in a project have to be defined and agreed by the relevant stakeholders at some point, but there are no pre-set parameters. The scope may be predefined (traditional) or expected to evolve (agile).
- The stakeholders have to agree that the work to accomplish the scope will be managed as ‘a project’ for the project to exist; the alternative is ‘business as usual’ or some other form of activity.

Modifying the definition of a project to incorporate these factors suggests a definition along these lines:

**Project:** *A structured group of people, temporarily established to accomplish an objective, under the leadership of a person (or people) nominated to fulfil the role of project manager.*

**Project manager:** *A person (or people) appointed to lead and direct the work of a project organisation on behalf of its stakeholders, to achieve its objective. The job title, project management methodology, and the degree of authority and autonomy granted to the project manager are determined by the governance arrangements established by the project’s stakeholders.*

**Project management:** *The application of knowledge, skills tools and techniques to lead and direct the work of a project organisation.*

This set of definitions overcome many of the fundamental problems with the existing options, they:

- Recognise projects are done by people for people, they are not amorphous expenditures of ‘effort’
- Allow for the fact that projects do not exist in nature, they are ‘artificial constructs’ created by people for their mutual convenience, and different people confronting similar objectives can create very different arrangements to accomplish the work
- Enhance the importance of governance<sup>6</sup> and stakeholders<sup>7</sup> in determining the way the project shall be managed
- Recognise that projects are only projects if the people doing the work and the people overseeing the work decide to manage the work as a project.

The ‘always present’ factors are:

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<sup>6</sup> For more on **governance** see: <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-ORG-005.php#Process3>

<sup>7</sup> For more on **project stakeholders** see: <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-075.php>



- People decide to call the work a project (but just calling it a project is not enough)
- The work is directed towards achieving an objective<sup>8</sup> that involves a change in something (new, altered, improved, demolished, etc)
- The people doing the work are part of a temporary organisation (team / contract / ad hoc / etc) created and structured to facilitate achieving the objective
- The work is led by a person fulfilling the role of a project manager<sup>9</sup> and the work is managed as a project (PMBOK / ISO 21500 / Agile / etc).

## Benefits of Adopting the Revised Definition of “a Project”

Accepting the definition of *a project* contained in this paper has the potential for some very powerful outcomes that can offer significant benefits to the project management community. Some of the more important are set out below:

- Whilst everything in business (and for that matter, the rest of the world) **could** be a project, only endeavours that are being managed as a project are by this definition a project. This prevents project management from sinking into mundane irrelevance as a minor part of general management whilst (at the same time) encouraging the general use of project management in all appropriate situations (ie, project management is clearly differentiated from general management).
- As a consequence, it becomes possible to differentiate general business failures from project management failures. How many of the so-called IT project failures identified by the Standish Group, KPMG, et al were actually run as projects (ie, Scope identified, cost and time calculated, resources allocated, etc) and how many were simply managed according to some form of generic business processes without proper application of the methods and controls defined in the project management literature?
- The central role of an informed stakeholder community in the project management process is clearly recognised.
- The importance of standardised/codified project management practices and procedures is enhanced.
- A firm basis for the development of project management as a profession is established by removing the current ambiguity over what is (or is not) a project.
- The definition is consistent with our roots. The project management industry/profession grew out of the application of structured techniques such as critical path scheduling to complex industrial and business endeavours.

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<sup>8</sup> The **objective** should be defined in terms of the required output, and the time and cost allowed to accomplish the objective. This is discussed in ***Understanding the Iron Triangle and Projects***:  
<https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2024/04/01/understanding-the-iron-triangle-and-projects/>

<sup>9</sup> For more on the **competencies needed by a project manager** see:  
<https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-010.php>



## CONCLUSION

***Project: A structured group of people, temporarily established to accomplish an objective, under the leadership of a person (or people) nominated to fulfil the role of project manager.***

For projects and project management to deliver their full potential to the betterment of business and the community, the special nature of our craft and art needs to be recognised. Historically, successful projects have been credited with achieving major gains in productivity and predictability. This reputation is being damaged by the difficulty of distinguishing projects from other processes in the current business environment. This paper has suggested one way of starting the process of differentiating projects from other business processes. However, the authors acknowledge that achievement of any noticeable change in community perceptions will inevitably take a long time. The first step should be a common strategy agreed between the more influential authorities and organisations.

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