

## So what is project management?

Almost any human activity that involves carrying out a non-repetitive task can be a project. So we are all project managers! We all practice project management (PM).

But there is a big difference between carrying out a very simple project involving one or two people and one involving a complex mix of people, organizations and tasks.

This has been true for millennia, but large-scale projects like the Pyramids often used rather simple control and resource techniques including brute force to 'motivate' the workforce!

The art of planning for the future has always been a human trait. In essence a project can be captured on paper with a few simple elements: a start date, an end date, the tasks that have to be carried out and when they should be finished, and some idea of the resources (people, machines etc) that will be needed during the course of the project.

When the plan starts to involve different things happening at different times, some of which are dependent on each other, plus resources required at different times and in different quantities and perhaps working at different rates, the paper plan could start to cover a vast area and be unreadable.

This was a problem facing the US Navy in the development of the Polaris missile system. There were so many aspects to the project that a new technique had to be invented to cope with it: the PERT technique. This and later developments led to mathematical techniques that can be used to find the critical path through a series of planned tasks that interconnect during the life of a project.

You could begin the story of modern project management from this time. But that would be unfair as project management is not only about planning but also about human attributes like leadership and motivation.

Nevertheless, the idea that complex plans could be analysed by a computer to allow someone to control a project is the basis of much of the development in technology that now allow projects of any size and complexity not only to be planned but also modeled to answer 'what if?' questions.

The original programs and computers tended to produce answers long after an event had taken place. Now, there are many project planning and scheduling programs that can provide real time information, as well as linking to risk analysis, time recording, costing, estimating and other aspects of project control.

But computer programs are not project management: they are tools for project managers to use. Project management is all that mix of components of

control, leadership, teamwork, resource management etc. that goes into a successful project.

Project managers can be found in all industries. Their numbers have grown rapidly as industry and commerce has realized that much of what it does is project work. And as project-based organizations have started to emerge, project management is becoming established as both a professional career path and a way of controlling business.

So opportunities in project management now exist not only in being a project manager, but also as part of the support team in a project or program office or as a team leader for part of a project. There are also qualifications that can be attained through the professional associations.

One reason for the rapid growth is the need to understand how to look after complex projects, often in high tech areas, which are critical to business success but also have to use scarce resources efficiently.

Most people still want their projects to be on time, meet quality objectives, and not cost more than the budget. These form the classic time, quality, cost triangle.

In fact if you have an unlimited budget and unlimited time, project management becomes rather easy. For most people, however, time and money are critical and that is what makes project management so important today.

Further reading: If you are new to all these ideas then there is a wealth of books ranging from basic introductions to advanced techniques: check out our [book section here - and a good starter is \*Managing Smaller Projects, a no-nonsense best-seller, suitable for the smallest project upwards.\*](#)

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