

CHRISTIAN EMINENT COLLEGE, INDORE

(Academy of Management, Professional Education and Research)
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E-Content

On

“Dividend Policies”

14th June 2022

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What is project management?

PMI defines project management as “the use of specific knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to deliver something of value to people.”

In simple terms, project management means the process of leading a team to hit goals or complete deliverables within a set timeframe. Project management involves project documentation, planning, tracking, and communication—all with the goal of delivering work successfully within the [constraints of time, scope, and budget](#).

What is a project? Project management examples

To explain the concept of project management further, think about all the projects you encounter every day—both in business and your personal life.

- At work, you might build or contribute to a deliverable, like a report, a website, a tool or product, or even a building.
- At home, you might make a meal, plan a vacation, or even work on upgrades to your home.

These are just a few examples of true projects that have a defined start and end date, goal, scope, and resources. And they all require some level of management.

In business, which is where we'll focus in this chapter, a project is typically a unique operation conducted to meet specific goals.

Examples of projects may include:

- [Development of software](#) to increase employee productivity
- [Construction](#) of a building to house community events
- [Design of a website](#) to decrease call volume to a business

All of these projects require a team of people who are responsible for different aspects of the delivery. For example, you'd likely see a designer, developer, and copywriter working on website design projects. In many instances, a project manager is staffed to these projects to ensure the team delivers the project on time and under budget and hits its key objectives.

Project manager definition: What does a project manager do?

Project managers work on the front lines of projects, defending their teams, clients, and projects from miscommunication, missed deadlines, scope creep, and any other failures. You'll find project managers in just about every industry, including [construction](#), [agencies](#), [marketing](#), [manufacturing](#), [HR teams](#), [software development](#), [engineering](#), and [event planning](#).

No matter where they work or what type of projects they manage, project managers champion the well-being of the people involved in their projects and facilitate strategic decisions that uphold the goals of their projects. That's a hefty job description, and it requires a fine

balance of managing the administrative details of a project and its people.

While project managers often work behind the scenes in a project, they must be part of bigger strategic project conversations to be highly effective. They're not on your team to just take notes and make sure you're recording your time properly. Yes, they do work in spreadsheets and follow up on deadlines. But a project manager's role on your team is important for several reasons.

Let's take a closer look at a project manager's tasks and responsibilities.

Project manager roles and responsibilities

As mentioned, a project manager's role—and even title—may differ slightly from place to place, but the basics of what a project manager does for a team are fairly consistent (though some may be less formal than others).

The role of the project manager involves many tasks and responsibilities, including:

- Implementing [project management methodologies](#)
- Planning and [defining scope](#)
- [Setting and managing expectations](#)
- Crafting process
- [Creating project plans](#)
- Managing tasks

- [Resource allocation](#) and planning
- [Time/cost estimating](#)
- [Analyzing and managing risks](#) and issues
- Monitoring and [reporting project status](#)
- Providing team leadership
- Influencing strategy
- Facilitating communication and collaboration
- [Planning and facilitating meetings](#)

That's a lot to include in one job description—one that doesn't actually hold any operational or management responsibility for the team working on the projects.

Project managers are often in a tough position of trying to make things happen without the authority to truly push an issue. To be effective, you have to gain the trust and respect of your teams and have endorsement from senior management.

Project management process

There's no single way to run all projects. Many organizations spend a lot of time making mistakes and adjusting their approach to get it just right, only to find it needs tweaking again.

Changing business needs and goals, new or different staff and expertise, and evolving or new technology are just some of the

reasons processes have to adapt. That's why having a basic framework for how projects operate in your organization or team is so important.

As you research project management, you'll find most models organize activities into 3 basic phases (with varying names, tasks, and deliverables):

1. Research, discovery, and planning

Typically, an organization will perform some level of research to determine the validity of a project. This could take the form of market research, user research, competitive analyses, or other activities.

These [critical steps in the project](#) help define goals and requirements for what needs to be designed or built. This phase is also when a project team comes together to define how they'll work together and what their execution plan will be, taking all outside factors into consideration.

2. Executing

Once the project is planned, it's time to execute. Project execution can play out in several different ways, whether your team uses [Waterfall project management](#), [Agile methodology](#), or [hybrid approaches](#).

Essentially what you'll find in this phase is time for collaboration, creation, review, and iteration. Teams will partner with stakeholder groups to present work, accept feedback, and complete deliverables that are mutually agreed upon, leading up to a final deliverable.

This phase is riddled with change, delays, and sometimes even dispute. For that reason, it's also the phase where the project manager is most active.

3. Testing, measuring, and iterating

After a project has launched, it's time to make sure it's tracking well against its goals.

- In an Agile project, a minimum viable product (or MVP) will launch to gain early feedback to iterate.
- On Waterfall projects, the feature-complete product will be launched and tested.

In either case, test results will reveal what is—and isn't—working for users and stakeholders.

Teams will take test results and alter—or build on—the product to create something that's closer to those goals. This is natural for Agile projects, but not so much for Waterfall projects, which would require a new or “Phase 2” project to be added on.

There's no right or wrong way to roll out a process. Just be sure it matches the values and talent of the organization. If a process isn't the right fit for a team, it'll quickly become evident because people will be unhappy and issues will pop up in the work.

The best thing you can do is sit down with your team to discuss what will work best and why. Document decisions, roll out a process, and be open to discussing and changing it when needed.

Keep the 3 phases above in the back of your mind for an overall framework to operate by, and do what feels right for your project and team.

What are the benefits of project management?

Project managers perform so many intangible tasks that it's not uncommon for people to not fully understand their worth. So how can you demonstrate the benefits of project management?

- First, it starts with you. Each and every project manager should know their role inside and out. Following through by being a good project manager for your team will show everyone the value you bring to a project.
- Second, it comes down to the organization. You can't thrive as a project manager if your organization doesn't value the role and see how your work benefits the business. [Learn why project management is good for business.](#)
- Lastly, the benefit of having a project manager on a team is realized by the people you work with. If your team isn't bought in, you'll have a hard time helping.

You may not always need a dedicated project manager, but you do need someone who will handle project management tasks. For instance, on a small team, sometimes just having someone handle logistics and communications is enough. That person might be a producer, account manager, designer, or even developer.

Managing tasks and communications can provide more time for team members to collaborate and get work done. If that's not enough to sell you on the value of project management, consider these additional benefits.

More efficient teams

Having a project manager on your team means you've got someone dedicated to making sure work is done on time and at the right time. That person also ensures the team's practices run smoothly so they can focus on working hard and producing successful products.

Happier teams and clients

Everyone walks away from projects that are done on time and budget with a smile on their faces. They're also happy when they're communicating well. Guess who helps make all of that happen?

Better organization

Teams with project managers benefit from the fact that someone's paying attention to how, when, and why something should happen. Great project managers use tools like [project plans](#) and [RACI charts](#) to help suss out the details and streamline communication.

Team growth and development

When you're trying to work on a task and manage it along with everyone and everything else, it can be tough. That means you don't have time to focus on your work product, or developing strategies or methodologies to do it better.

When a project manager's involved, that stress is peeled away, and the team gets to collaborate and grow by trying new approaches to

deliverables. There's something to be said for letting experts focus solely on their craft (even when that expert is a project manager).

More flexibility

Great project managers know projects change, and they're always on the lookout for it. And when change becomes a real factor, they immediately find ways to adapt the project's path. Having a project manager on your team means you'll always know when a risk, issue, or change is on the horizon so you can plan for it.

Better quality

When your team is focused on their craft, the quality of work goes up because they have all the time they need (well, within scope) to do that job.

And a good project manager will always have quality of work on their mind as they help deliver work to stakeholders. It's common for a project manager to contribute to internal reviews, proofread content, and make sure work is flawless before it goes out the door.

Higher output

This one is important for business owners. When you remove the burden of project management from your team and place it on one person, you free up your team's time to take on more projects and produce more work. Sounds like a win-win.

More transparency and accountability

Organizations also benefit from the hard facts and details you get out of typical [project management reporting](#). Regular reports increase

transparency on budget and timeline and lead to better task accountability.

All of these project management benefits come together to not only affect the bottom line, but the people and the process as well.

Project management definitions and terms

Project management terms can get technical, but it all comes back to things that keep projects on track. Here's a list of definitions every project manager should know:

Agile

[Agile methodologies](#) are based on the mindset that self-organizing software development teams can deliver value through iteration and collaboration. The *Manifesto for Agile Software Development* was formally developed in 2001 by 17 practitioners and is based on a core set of values of delivering value and collaborating with customers. These principles include:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Working software over comprehensive documentation
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- Responding to change over following a plan

Assumption

When you or your team make assumptions, you have to communicate them because project assumptions can affect scope, goals, deliverables, and outcomes. In fact, assumptions can set the context for how a project is defined and even executed.

You'll see project managers bringing up assumptions and turning them into larger conversations, scope line items, milestones, deliverables, and anything else to ensure the team operates on concrete facts.

Change management

Projects change often, and it's your job as a project manager to make sure everyone—clients, team, and any other related parties—is aware of the change and its impacts.

As the scope or business requirements change during the project, it's very likely the estimated effort, associated cost, and original deadline may no longer be valid. In this case, the project manager will draft a [change order](#) or [change request document](#) to formalize the change and its associated impacts.

Client/customers

This can mean a couple of things. Project managers in a consulting space—like an advertising agency or construction company—work with clients to build or deliver a product. They need to take those clients into account when crafting process, presenting work, and gaining approvals.

At the same time, those clients might have clients or customers they're trying to please in production. Often, in the digital space, you'll

hear those people referred to as “users,” and a lot of work is done to ensure a product is built to please these people.

Constraints

Constraints are limitations outside the control of the project team that need to be managed to. A [project constraint](#) might include scope, budget, or timeline. There’s only so much you can do within those bounds, so they set a constraint on the work product. Project managers are hyper-aware of these constraints because it’s their job to deliver projects on time and budget.

Critical path

The critical path is the sequence of stages determining the minimum time needed for an operation, especially when analyzed on a computer for a large organization. It’s a formal, step-by-step project management technique for process planning that defines critical and non-critical tasks with the goal of preventing scheduling or timeline problems and [process bottlenecks](#).

Deliverable

A deliverable is any tangible outcome produced by the project. It’s either produced along the way to gain consensus or delivered at the end as the final work product. Deliverables include visual designs, documents, plans, code, prototypes, blueprints, proofs, buildings, apps, websites, products, etc.

Dependency

In project management, a dependency refers to a task that cannot happen without its predecessor being completed. This is an important

detail for project managers to consider when planning projects. [Planning tools like TeamGantt](#) make it easy to point out and track dependencies.

Gantt chart

A gantt chart is a chart with a series of horizontal lines that show the progress of work done over certain periods of time in relation to the time planned for those periods. TeamGantt produces beautiful gantt charts to help you keep track of your project tasks, dependencies, resources, and even communications. [Learn more about gantt charts!](#)

Goal/objective

A project goal or objective is a documented statement of the intent and outcome of the project. Goals are used to help make decisions when a project arrives at a crossroads or point of indecision (or runs into [scope creep](#)) because the goals determine project success.

Issues

Project managers constantly hunt for project issues so they can knock them down before they become bigger problems. Issues typically impede the progress of the project and cannot always be resolved by the project manager or project team without outside consultation.

A common issue in [marketing project management](#) is when content is missing or late. When that happens, it holds up progress and often requires the deadline to be moved.

Methodology

There are several ways to manage projects, as methodologies have been formalized and taught for several years—Waterfall and Agile methods included.

It's good to know how methods were created, and decide for yourself how they can be adapted in the work you're doing today. If you're looking to learn, see our chapter on [project management methodologies](#), which covers the following categories:

- Traditional methodologies
- Agile methodologies
- Change management methodologies
- Process-based methodologies

Milestone

A [milestone](#) is an action or event marking a significant change or stage in the production or development of a project.

By its project management definition, a milestone has a duration of zero and no effort because no work is associated with it. It's essentially a point in the project plan that signifies important work has been completed, and the project will transition to a new phase.

Program

Working on several projects that are connected in some way (goals, product, client, etc.) is often [referred to as a program](#). The program itself is not a project with deliverables. It provides overall management to ensure there's a central point of communication that

provides consistency and alignment for the proper timing, pacing, and approval of all interconnected projects.

Program manager

Program managers are often not only responsible for projects, but also for larger strategic initiatives and sometimes teams of project managers. When it comes to programs—or sets of projects—they help articulate the goals and objectives of those connected projects and how their outcomes will impact the business overall. Knowing these goals helps them focus on the strategy of each project's implementation and how to get them done with the appropriate resources and team members.

Project

This was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Projects are unique operations that are conducted to meet specific goals. Examples of projects might be the development of software to increase employee productivity, the construction of a building to house community events, or the design of a website to decrease call volume to a business.

Project manager

Also mentioned earlier in this chapter, project managers are the people who work on the front lines of projects, defending their teams, clients, and projects from miscommunication, missed deadlines, scope creep, and any other failures. They champion the well-being of the people involved in their projects and facilitate strategic decisions that uphold the goals of their projects.

Project phase

Project managers will break a series of tasks or deliverables into phases to keep the project organized. On a [website redesign project](#), logical phases might be definition, design, development, and deployment.

Project plan/timeline/schedule

Project managers [build project plans](#) to chart the course for how a project will be completed. Good project plans show overall process in phases, deliverables, and tasks, along with corresponding details on who's responsible, dates when work will start and finish, and any relevant notes for each task.

The project plan is a form of communication and arguably one of the most important deliverables on a project, as it provides detail on what should be happening at any point during the course of a project. You can find plenty of [sample plans and templates](#) on the TeamGantt website.

Project team

The project team includes the people who are responsible for conducting tasks and completing deliverables on a project. Project teams vary by industry and project type, and companies recruit the proper team members with expertise to conduct the work.

Requirements

Requirements are critical to getting a project done right. [Project requirements](#) are often included in a detailed scope of work and define how the product should act, appear, and function within the stated goals.

Resources

This is a term that is by far the least human of all project management terms. Resources are the people who do the work on projects. A better term here would be “staff” or “team,” but for some reason, we revert back to this.

Resourcing plan

Resourcing plans are created to ensure staff are properly assigned to projects and not being over- or underutilized. A simple way to sort this out is by using the [resource management features](#) in TeamGantt, which allows you to assign people to tasks and estimate the time needed to complete them.

Risk

Issues cause risk! When project managers talk about risk, they’re thinking about potential issues or events that cause things to go wrong, along with the probability the event will occur and its potential impact on the project.

A good way to keep a team tuned in to potential risks is by including a [risk register](#) (or a list of risks, issues, and a mitigation plan) in a regular [status report](#).

Scope

A scope defines in detail what the project will and won’t deliver. In a consulting agency, this takes shape in a formalized [project scope document](#). On an internal team, it might take shape as a [project brief](#) or even a less formalized format, like an email.

Sponsor (executive sponsor and project sponsor)

When working on large projects, you might hear the ultimate decision-maker or funder referred to as the project sponsor. This person has ultimate authority over the project and will be involved in making funding decisions, resolving issues and scope changes, [approving deliverables](#), and providing overall strategic direction.

At the same time, the sponsor is often held responsible for championing a project within an organization, ensuring everyone's on board with the initiative.

Stakeholder

Stakeholders are the people who have an actual stake in the outcome of the project. They may be internal to the project (marketing, IT, and other departments), as well as external to the project (suppliers, investors, partners, etc.).

Project managers work with stakeholder groups to make sure they're aware of project developments and are part of the decision-making process when necessary.

Waterfall

The [Waterfall model](#) is certainly among the most widely known and practiced project management methodologies. The key ingredient in running a Waterfall project is to complete a task and hand it down to be used, or built on, in a following task or phase.

The Waterfall process requires a fair amount of planning and requirement-gathering before work begins. Without that initial planning, steps can be missed, incomplete, or even out of line. Further, any alteration to project requirements can cause a change in scope.