

# The project management toolbox

*Part one – So, why are we doing this project? Project Qualification.*

**W**e seem to be suffering from a proliferation of projects. In these tougher, more competitive times, organisations are launching projects to grow, to refocus, to restructure, to cut back. Projects multiply happily away. And no-one realises the scale of wasted resources, with little apparent return, until the budget's been blown, and the senior team are looking for answers.

**The solution to this problem can be summed up in one word – transparency.**

Transparency means all but the smallest projects should go through a qualification process to ensure it is the right thing to be doing. From the outset it is worth considering how the project fits into the organisation's wider strategic direction and how important it really is. It will help if you complete a feasibility study with a high level business case that clearly states the output of the project and the impact it will have.

Transparency also means testing planning and business case assumptions. Ensuring assumptions are realistic and fact-based will allow the scale of the project to be gauged more accurately. And use, or create, a senior management forum to review projects, assess their relative merits, set priorities and authorise only those they want to proceed with.

The cultural angle is as important here as the procedural one. Experience shows that even with a well-constructed project

authorisation process, old habits die hard. Everyone in the project supply chain must understand that there is only one way to start a project. If the process is not followed the only answer will be a firm 'No'. And get some back-up from other parts of the business. Money talks, so ensure that the Finance team requests the necessary sign-offs before allocating the budget. It's surprising how quickly this can focus the mind!

## Learning points

- Get a business case developed for every project
- Make sure the business case covers all the bases and is agreed by the right people
- Think about how to get people to follow the rules of project initiation, and how these can be embedded into everyday working.

## Upsetting people when you say 'No': The secret to scoping

Project management is not a popularity contest. This will become clear the moment the scope of a project begins to be discussed. Scoping is about being prepared to face up to, negotiate and, when necessary, say 'No' to people.



Many projects derail because people did not challenge the scope enough at the point of definition – resulting in an unmanageably broad project which tries to please everyone, but which is also undeliverable.

So, the first secret to scoping is to develop a tight, well-defined scope before the project is initiated. That means providing as much detail as possible around what the project will, and will not, deliver and to whom. This avoids ambiguity.

The second secret is to manage the scope, because even when projects begin with a tightly defined scope, they often fail to protect this when it is questioned – resulting in constantly shifting goalposts.

Inevitably projects can and often should change as they progress, but it's important to be careful about how this change occurs. Make it a decision, not an accident. Pretty much throughout its lifecycle, people will have bright ideas about what should be included in a project's scope. The correct response to these is to politely insist on a formal Change Request being made. Until this has been raised, the impact assessed and the change approved, the scope remains the same.

Exercising this level of control may make a project sponsor or manager unpopular at times, but by maintaining a firm grip of the scope there's a much better chance of keeping the project on track and ultimately, delivering successfully.

## Learning points

- Develop an unambiguous scope
- Don't be over ambitious, do not sign up to what cannot be delivered
- Protect the scope. Manage changes to it rigorously.



This is the first of a short series of articles addressing some of the fundamentals of project management. Our next piece will look at creating the perfect project plan. Watch this space...