



An Introduction to Project Management

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There are very few industries out there that can't benefit from Project Management in some way. Whether building a skyscraper, developing new software, installing a plumbing system, designing a housing project, running a business convention, or even planning a birthday party, project management is essential to success.

The team at Investopedia offers this perfect definition of the term:

Project Management involves the planning and organization of a company's resources to move a specific task, event, or duty towards completion. It can involve a one-time project or an ongoing activity, and resources managed include personnel, finance, technology, and intellectual property.

No matter what the project, the majority of the resources listed in that definition will be involved in some way, and they will need to be organized to ensure that the project runs smoothly.

The position of Project Manager is not an easy one, but it is essential. Your project will likely include a team of experts and specialists who all have a specific role to play. There needs to be someone who offers them structure, support, and instruction. A good project manager with the right set of skills can do that.

With the role of Project Manager fulfilled, you can expect better time management, more clearly defined tasks, a solid, easy-to-follow roadmap, and some assurances that the project caters to the expectations of the company and the stakeholders.

So with all of that in mind, the question becomes: 'How?' What does a project manager actually do to achieve these goals? Naturally, it varies from project to project, but several core ideals and skills typically go into the role.

To give you an introduction to how project management operates, let's discuss these skills and how they are put into action:

The first essential skill to think about when embarking on a project is arguably the most important one, and that's the art of communication. A project manager can be as organized and proactive as humanly possible and still be ineffective in running a smooth project because they lack communication skills.

Managers work with a wide range of people, and their team is a diverse group of professionals. All of them need to be clear on their responsibilities and the company's expectations of them. They also deal with stakeholders who need to be kept updated on progress and reassured of how the project benefits the company.

Knowing the **details** well enough to give them to a team member or stakeholder isn't enough. Good communication means being able to adapt your delivery to suit different people. Your team's lead software engineer will view the project from a different perspective to the business analyst, who will, in turn, view it differently from the resource manager.

And then, the stakeholders will all be thinking of it from the perspectives of scheduling, budget, and overall benefits. A project manager must have the necessary communication skills to understand all of these perspectives. Improving these skills can best be achieved through good listening - too often ignored as one of the critical components of communication.

Dara Fontein of *Unito* explains it like this:

When we think about how project managers can improve their communication skills, we only focus on the output: when to say something, how to say it, and how often. While those are all core components of communication, a successful project manager knows that they also need to consider how to listen, facilitate work and manage emotions.

Good communication is not one-sided. A team member will be more compliant with your guidance and instruction if they feel like they are being heard. You need to listen to and process what they're saying instead of just waiting for another opportunity to speak. And why you need to ask questions to understand better their outlook and what they bring to the project.

More than anything else, communication is about building a rapport with every relevant person involved in the project. It helps when adapting to changes, resolving conflicts, and maintaining focus, among other essential functions.

This leads us to another important aspect of project management: planning. Even the best plan won't make up for shoddy communication skills, but the same can be said for the reversal. The true value of your communication skills won't be realized unless you have a clear, detailed, and accessible plan for the team.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) has developed a framework that you can apply to any project, and it's become the standard for project managers. It's a series of phases known as the Project Life Cycle, and all project managers should familiarize themselves with it. Lucy Brown analyzed the concept for *Invesis* and summed its function up like this:

It's simpler for a project manager to handle all the current details of the project when it's broken down into various phases. Each phase of the cycle is goal-oriented, having its own set of characteristics, and contains product deliverables which are reviewed at the end of the Project Management steps.

It's a way for managers to split the project into small, manageable chunks regardless of how substantial of a project it is. Let's consider something as grand in scale as the Olympic games. Organizing that is as much of a project management venture as anything. If you break it down, it becomes less intimidating.

You would first take it through an initiation stage. In this stage, you outline the scope and feasibility, identify potential stakeholders, and draw up a business case. As the Olympics are an established event and globally anticipated, this part wouldn't present as much of a struggle as initiating a brand new product or service. Nevertheless, the second phase - planning - would be a big deal.

During this second phase, every major decision would have to be made. Venues are located and booked, travel is organized for the massive numbers of international athletes and viewers, the accommodation for the athletes needs to be organized, and there is also marketing and merchandise to think about.

The best project managers will know how to develop this plan to take into account the budget and timeline and utilize the team to the best of their abilities. The planning phase should culminate in a clear delegation of tasks for the team to lead into the execution and monitoring phases.

It is essential for project managers to remember when executing a plan because it is impossible to know what changes might be necessary due to external forces. Monitoring a plan during its execution is essential, and project managers must be flexible enough to respond to these changes.

This applies to a project as big as the Olympics, as well as one as seemingly insignificant as planning your office Christmas party. In an article for HBR, Jeffrey Elton and Justin Roe made this point in relation to planning and adaptation:

A detailed project plan would give managers a false sense of security, but if they pay attention to the constraints, they will be on their way to capturing and consistently managing the essential risks of their project. They need to rely on their intuition about where the pressure points are likely to arise and focus on managing those risks.

'Constraints' in this context refer to anything that will impose a limitation upon your project, and in general, they will fall into one of three categories. Dr. Harpreet Dhillon refers to this as the 'Iron Triangle,' and the categories are **Scope, Cost, and Time**.

These are the areas through which risks to the success of your project may arise. Take the example of planning the office Christmas party. You might find that the company has set aside a certain amount of money but then has to reallocate some of it, forcing you to alter the plan. Or maybe the party gets rescheduled to an earlier date, meaning that you have less time to plan.

As you can see, understanding project management doesn't just mean putting yourself in the shoes of someone heading something significant for a large company. Any undertaking which requires a series of tasks to achieve an aim would be classified as a project and would benefit from a project manager. If approached correctly, it is a position that is based around a set of skills, primarily communication and planning, and that follows a clearly defined framework.

So if you think that project management might be the right career for you, familiarize yourself with the relevant skills and frameworks. This week, why not try putting them into practice with any project, big or small, to gain valuable, practical knowledge.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening, and remember: keep building the best you.

Reading List:

[Article] Project Management, The Investopedia Team

[Article] Building Effective Communication Skills: A Guide for Project Managers, Dara Fontein

[Article] The Project Management Life Cycle and its Five Phases, Lucy Brown

[Article] Bringing Discipline to Project Management, Jeffrey Elton & Justin Roe

[Article] Iron Triangle — Triple Constraints of Project Management, Harpreet Dhillon