Selling the Sizzle, Not the Sausage and Why Projects Often Fail to Deliver.

Faced with having to persuade someone to buy a sausage, how would you proceed?

Would you choose to describe in detail exactly what your product was and how it was superior to other sausages? It's unlikely isn't it? Drawing any attention at all to which bits of dead pig you've chosen to amalgamate into your banger is unlikely to be helpful.

No. What you would do is focus on what it will do for you. A hunger satiated, a delicious fried breakfast eagerly anticipated, a grateful and loving family scene around the dinner table; how much more compelling and attractive are these images?

And you would do this because you have learned the key secret of advertising, namely, that you don't focus on the product, you focus on the benefits it brings. You 'sell the sizzle and not the sausage!'

This mantra conveys a lesson that has served advertising executives well, but it's also a lesson that offers much to the project management community.

Hurt by our History?

Traditional Project Management has its roots in Civil Engineering and those epic endeavours that created the built environment upon which modern civilisation depends.

Soaring concrete curtain dams, sweeping and elegant bridges, towering sky scrapers; we can all visualise them. The deliverable becomes an icon that demonstrates triumph over adversity, the ultimate achievement, the final goal, the crowning glory. And that really is the point. When the deliverable is so obvious as a bridge, and its purpose usually so apparent, it is easy to promote the 'What' above all other considerations This, however, is a dangerous mistake to make because whereas it may be evidence of the ultimate success of the engineers' ingenuity and industry, it is not evidence of the ultimate success of the project. The ultimate success of a project is not about the deliverable, it's about the degree to which operation of the deliverable realises the intended benefit; the 'Why'.

Increasingly, Project Management is not confined to the portacabins and muddy excavations of construction projects. Increasingly, Project Management's collection of tools and techniques are the first port of call for those delivering the future within industries and sectors as diverse as IT, banking, pharmaceutical, biotech, FMCG manufacture, charities, etc.

As one who has spent many years helping organisations with their project management in each of these, and many other sectors, I am constantly and pleasantly surprised at just how transferable these tools and techniques are between sectors. Irrespective of the topic of the project, most problems, and hence remedies, are common to all. However these contemporary projects do not share an important characteristic with these original Civil Engineering projects, namely that the vital challenge of realising the benefit, is relatively straightforward. For most projects the realisation of benefits is a very tricky proposition and unfortunately the tools and techniques required were not so well developed in those early years. They were a little late the party but the good news is that they have now arrived, and they do so under the heading of Benefits Management.

Some Useful Models.

Lifecycle models are very helpful for understanding projects. The most common format for these is sometimes known as a 'Waterfall' model and they consist of distinct and sequential phases.

Consistent with the focus on the deliverable, the early lifecycle models conclude at the point that the Project Manager and their team end their involvement and depart. This is at the point in time when responsibility for, and ownership of, the completed deliverable is transferred to the operational team. Such a model is shown at Figure 1.

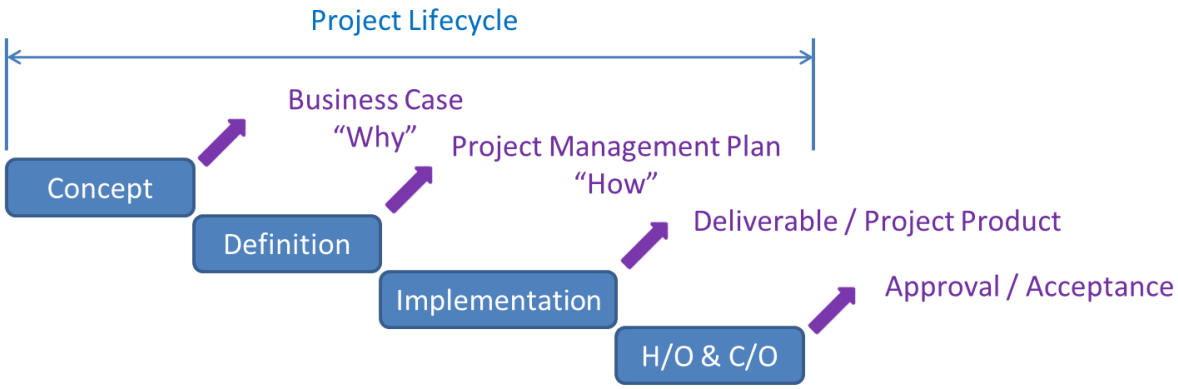

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Figure 1: Simple Lifecycle Model

The Concept phase is the start of the project when a Business Case for the project is drafted. If this is approved then the Definition phase follows with the PM and team planning how the project's deliverable is to be created. The output of this phase is contained within the Project Management Plan (PMP). As the saying goes 'You plan the work and then work the plan' and so, during the next phase, the deliverable is created in accordance with the plan. Handing-over the deliverable and Closeout of the project facilities brings the project to its end.

The obvious shortcoming of this model is the matter raised above, namely, it addresses only the creation of the project's deliverable and not its benefit. The latter is realised through the operation of the former and so a more holistic model would be as that described in Figure 2. This is as the previous model but includes two additional phases Operation and Disposal. Both these relate to the product. The former is self-explanatory and the second is perhaps obvious but its potential importance should not be underestimated, indeed many projects are rendered non-viable if the disposal costs of the deliverable are included. A nuclear power station would be an appropriate example in this respect.

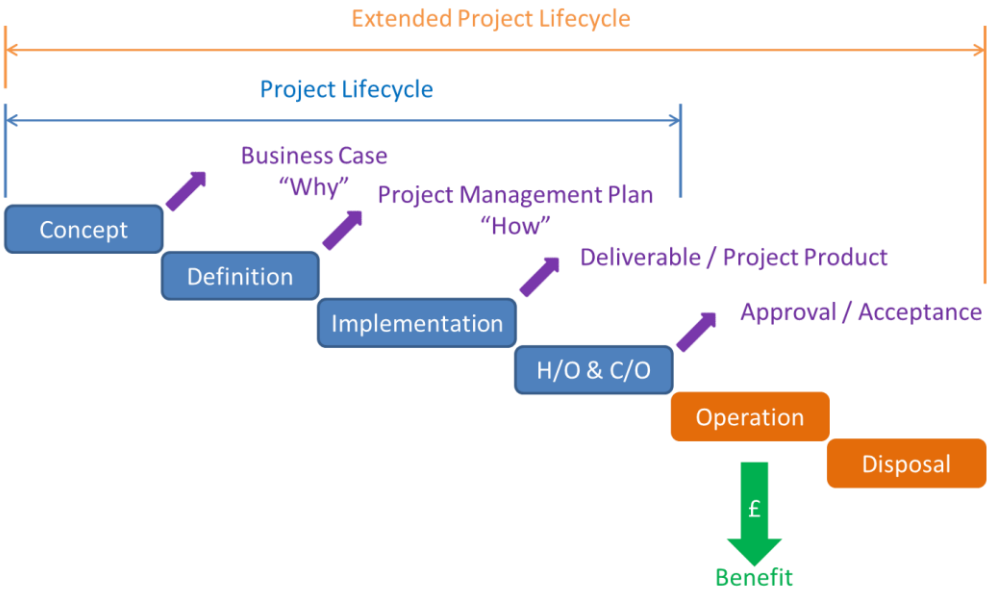

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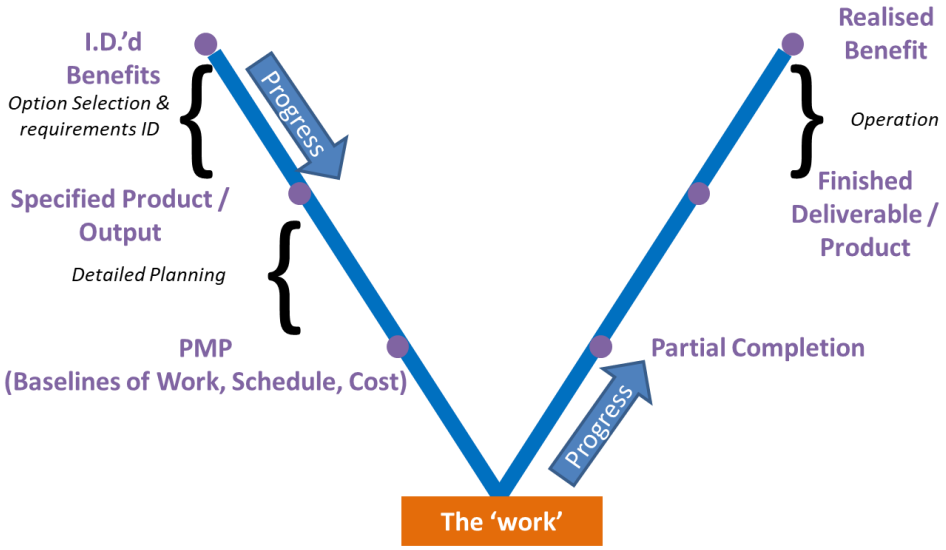
Figure 2: Extended Lifecycle Model

Whereas the Waterfall model is the most common format for lifecycle models, they are not the only one. Another particularly useful format is the V-Model.

Imagine gripping the left hand of the lifecycle in Figure 2 in your left hand and the other end in your right and then putting your foot in the middle and pulling. You will have converted the lifecycle into the V-Model in Figure 3.



Adapted from 'Project Management For Supplier Organizations', Taggart 2015

Figure 3: Project V-Model

V-models help us to consider the surprisingly complex notion of project success.

Measures of Project Success

Following the lifecycle down the left hand limb and up the right hand limb we have the following.

At the very start of a project is an idea. Some kind of threat or opportunity is perceived that warrants a response; global warning, for instance. In a practical sense, however, the beginning of our lifecycle is when this perception gives rise to a defined benefit; carbon free generation of electricity, for instance.

What then needs to be addressed is a selection of deliverable because, in this example, there are very many ways of realising the benefit. Wind farms, solar farms, tidal barrages are all options and only one can be favoured.

Having specified the deliverable, the project manager can now focus on how the deliverable will be created. Thus a PMP is created which amongst other aspects will include the schedule and budget for the remaining project. The real work can then commence. At some point a partially complete deliverable will be available and then later a final deliverable. Presuming this is deemed satisfactory, the deliverable will then be operated and the benefit realised.

The particular usefulness of a V-model now comes to light if we consider the notion of 'project success'.

In the final analysis the only measure of success that matters is, 'Did we deliver the benefits we set out to?'. This test is represented by the uppermost 'rung' in the model (Figure 4) and it is influenced by everything below the rung, not just whether we successfully created the deliverable of project but whether we chose the right project option in the first placed and whether it was used properly afterwards.

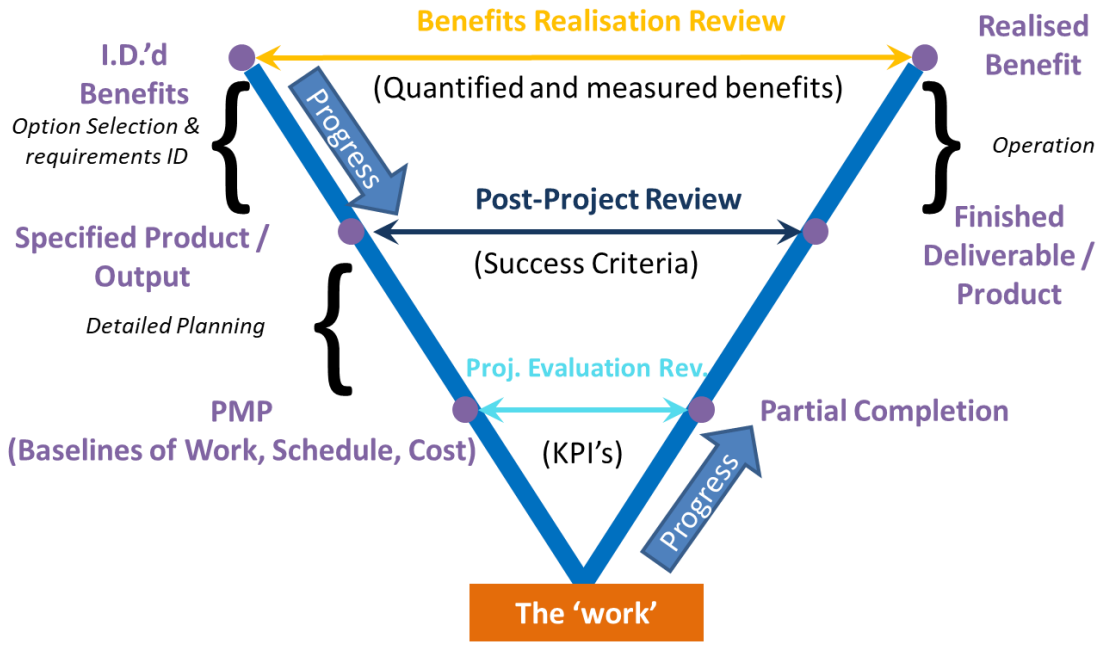


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Figure 4: Tests of Project Success

Typically, it takes a few years of operation of the deliverable before things settle down and assessment of benefit realisation can be made (think of bringing a new product to market, it takes a while for word to get around and a stable customer base to establish itself.) It is the most important test of success, but its drawback is that it is usually too late to do anything about it since the answer is known long after the project manager and their team left the stage.

The only test that can be applied at the point of the PM's departure relates to the deliverable; the middle 'rung'. Was it on time? Was it on budget? Does it work? These three success criteria of time, cost and quality, and their relative importance, have been headline news ever since those pioneering engineering projects. What is not fully appreciated, however, is that it is only a secondary measure of success. A project can meet all these criteria associated with the middle rung and still be a failure at the uppermost rung. Imagine a factory to build cassette tapes completed on time and to budget and yet starts production two months before the arrival onto the market of CD's. If it was your pension invested in this project you would you be happy? Perhaps on a more reassuring note, it also means that projects that are late and over budget are not necessarily failures so long as the benefits subsequently realised was sufficient. Brunels' Great Western Railway line was significantly late and over budget. Does this mean in hindsight it wasn't worth doing? Of course not.

The lowest rung on the ladder relates to performance during the Implementation phase of the project. It compares what we have achieved against that which we should have achieved. The former is produced by direct measures of activity, often referred to as KPI's. The latter is are the baseline estimates within the PMP of cost and time i.e. budget and schedule. Such comparison indicates likelihood of subsequently meeting the success criteria and is the basis of project control.

Why do Projects Fail?

Each of the rungs represents a test of what lies beneath.

The middle rung tests that which we traditionally view of the project manager's role and assesses their ability to plan and subsequently create the deliverable to the defined success criteria of time, cost and quality. Clearly this is a very important aspect of success and failure here can have very serious consequences, however it isn't the most important aspect. What is far more important to an organisation than manging their projects well, is ensuring they manage the right projects. The right project poorly managed still has some worth. The wrong project managed well does not.

Research would seem to uphold this. The reality is that most projects that fail, do so because of a failure to define and address the requirement of the deliverable rather an inability to create it. Indeed the terminal error in projects is often made before the delivery PM is appointed, even though the error may not become apparent for many years afterwards, perhaps even after PM has finished their work.

This underlines the importance of those activities that come under the uppermost rung but above the middle rung. These are the activities of Benefits Management the more significant elements of which are as follows.

What Does Benefits Management Include?

It was Søren Kierkegaard who suggested 'Life needs to be lived forwards but understood backwards' and if he wasn't such a hugely successful philosopher then I am sure he would have been very successful in the world of project management because his instincts are spot on.

The realisation of benefit is the ultimate goal of any project and this comes about by putting the project's deliverable to use. This operational end state is what we seek and everything done by the project should be to support and promote it. It needs to be recognised and understood at the start because it is going to underpin all subsequent decisions as to how to get there ('If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there'.)

What is perhaps immediately obvious is that, even if we have a perfect deliverable, success is not guaranteed. In addition we require a whole suite of complementary behaviours on behalf of both our internal operational team and probably our external customers too, both of which are examples of project stakeholders.

Focusing on the former, we need users to be capable of operating the deliverable; happy and willing to do so; and also adjacent processes, equipment and environments that are complementary and supportive. These do not happen by accident.

By their nature, projects impose significant change. As a general rule, people do not like change. To the delivery team, a project is an exciting and technical challenge but to those who must adapt their behaviour to the changes it brings, the project can be a very dangerous threat to status and wellbeing. Too many project practitioners have learnt this too late and at considerable cost. Ultimately projects are a battle for hearts and minds of project stakeholders, especially those of users.

At the risk of sounding a little Machiavellian, it is sometimes said that the secret of good management is trying to persuade people that it was their idea in first place. In the context of projects this means that at the start of the project you need to involve those whose behaviour changes and acquiescence you subsequently will rely upon.

The starting point for a project is the identification of a benefit that is consistent with the strategy of the sponsoring organisation but the first activity is tracking back from this benefit to decide what must be delivered to facilitate this operational end state. Too many organisations start a project with a preconceived idea of what should be delivered and simply proceed on this basis. Too often this is a very serious mistake. What is vital here is that the problem is defined without prescribing the solution: we need a comprehensive requirements statement for the deliverable.

The advantages of this approach are myriad.

Firstly, the process of requirements identification allows the involvement of the future users. Not only does this allow their technical expertise to be captured but it goes a very long way in securing their hearts and minds and acquiescence to the eventual changes that will be required.

Secondly, a comprehensive requirements statement allows the comparison of different options. As discussed earlier, the same benefit can be delivered by a number of different options for the deliverable. (In the example earlier, the benefit of carbon free electricity can be realised by a variety of different options for the deliverable; wind farms, solar panels etc.) Choosing the right project option is crucial and the requirements statement provides the only proper basis for it.

A third advantage is that it facilitates hand over of the management of the project to the delivery team since it not only identifies the deliverable, it emphasises the requirements that are most important to the sponsoring organisation. This orientates the team to the sponsor's objectives and provides a context for future decisions. If, for instance, during implementation of the project, constraints of time and money require de-scoping of the project, it is essential that the delivery team

know which requirements are less important than others. If the teams knows what you want, it is more likely they will deliver what you want.

There is a fourth advantage in that it provides a basis for deciding whether the completed deliverable is acceptable and hence whether the project manager has discharged their obligations.

In Conclusion.

Very often there is so much focus on the tangible deliverable that the project is creating, that it diverts attention from the real purpose of a project, namely the realisation of a benefit. There is some reason for this since the arena where traditional project management cut is teeth was Civil Engineering whose projects are largely characterised by the complexity and size of the product and the fairy straightforward challenge of subsequent realisation of benefit.

As the discipline of project management expands into other arenas the importance of those topics that come under the heading of Benefits Management must be elevated.

The delivery of both a deliverable and a benefit seriously complicates the notion of project success. A very useful model in this respect is a V-model since it is sufficiently holistic to encompass both considerations.

Such models also help indicate those crucial project activities that are outside of the conventional activities of Project Management but which have a dominant effect on the likelihood of project success. For instance most projects fail not because of poor delivery but because of a failure to identify and communicate the project requirement.

Understanding that requirement is not easy or quick but it provides enormous rewards, not least the opportunity to involve critical stakeholders at an early stage and secure their buy-in to the project.

It does however pose another question. If these activities of Benefits Management are not part of traditional Project Management are they outside of the role of the traditional Project Manager and if this is the case who is responsible for them?