

# Managing Projects: Large and Small; The Fundamental Skills for Delivering on Budget and on Time

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## Target Audience

This book is one of the HBS "Harvard Business Essentials" series, so it is intended to provide a basic overview of the Project Management field. It is appropriate for (1) familiarizing new project staff with the PM field or (2) providing experienced managers with a review of some current trends and issues. I bought it for the second reason and found it to be an excellent reference on basic approaches and ideas for improving PM practice.

## Overview

This general survey of PM is well-organized and easy to read. Each chapter contains both beginning and ending summaries of the main points. There is enough depth to provide a general understanding of the role of techniques (such as Gantt or PERT/CPM charts), but not so much detail that you get bogged down. There are three appendices with short forms for helping to: define the project, prepare a Work Breakdown Structure, and prepare a progress report. There is also a short glossary of PM terms.

The text is organized around four general project phases: (1) Define and Organize, (2) Plan, (3) Manage Execution and (4) Close Down. However, it is also made clear that the tasks in each phase may overlap or be revised over time as the project staff reviews and learns from implementation performance and changing conditions. The discussion usually centers on the basic PM concerns of ensuring that goals are met in the areas of (a) project output and quality, (b) cost and budget control, and (c) time targets and deadlines.

The authors express a concern that we may get too bogged down in implementing our original plan, budget, or schedule and thus fail to conduct regular checks of internal and external changes to see if adjustments are needed. At the same time, the book warns about the problems of adding so many new tasks that the project gets derailed from its basic mission (i.e., suffers from "mission creep"). While some issues may be resolved by a good risk management strategy, some innovation-oriented projects may require a more flexible or Adaptive Project Management strategy:

*A traditional model for project management is basically a linear progression of activities: define and organize, plan and schedule the work, manage execution and close down ... Feedback loops provide opportunities for learning to flow back into different components of the model... The traditional [linear] model is workable for many, if not most, projects, but it's less helpful for those with high levels of uncertainty... (page 116)*

Some studies by the book's advisor (Robert Austin) and others suggest that a successful Adaptive Project Management Model might do the following:

**"1. Approach tasks iteratively."** - Focus on successfully completing small tasks and using that experience to move forward incrementally.

**"2. Have fast cycles."** - Maintain shorter lead times to facilitate the iterative approach.

**"3. Emphasize early value delivery."** - Phase in smaller deliverables and earlier delivery dates, instead of waiting until the end of the project to deliver everything. This can also provide a more flexible approach to detecting and resolving implementation issues.

**"4. Staff the project with people who are capable of learning and adapting."** - Get people who are flexible and learn quickly from changes.

**"5. Put less reliance on decision-making tools that assume predictability."** - "Return on investment, net present value, and internal rate of return are useful decision tools, but only when future cash flows are reasonably predictable---which is not the case in projects with high uncertainty" pages 116-117).

I found the section on "Adaptive Project Management" particularly interesting because much of my experience has involved international development projects which are focused on producing significant innovations. Therefore, the traditional PM linear planning models and tools are often of limited value because (a) we cannot obtain adequate baseline or planning information and (b) implementation is often impacted by rapidly changing internal and external conditions. Nevertheless, many funding and implementing organizations still stick to a long-term linear approach, in spite of feedback suggesting that a shorter term perspective and iterative management strategy might be more effective.

## Strengths and Weaknesses of the Book

Some of my favorable reactions to this book have been included above. I would add that each chapter provides good ideas for managers to use in making up their own checklists for improving project management. For example, there is a thoughtful discussion of the need to (a) clearly define the role of the organization's senior managers in the project and then (b) formalize

specific tasks and commitments at each organizational level, to help ensure that everyone is clear about project priorities and the inputs needed to achieve these.

Even in organizations where the project approach is dominant, I often sense that (a) the project roles and commitments of senior managers are pretty vague and (b) the project level workers are seen as being the ones basically responsible for success for failure. Formalizing the roles and essential contributions of senior managers seems especially vital where organizational success clearly depends on the completion of successful projects. Since this is a book on "fundamental skills," it may be less interesting for project managers who can keep current on the rapidly expanding PM literature.

(Harvard Business School Press, 2004, paperback, 178 pages, \$19.95)

Reviewer Rating of this book (4 out of 5):  — James R. Brady, 10/04/2006

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