

The essence of *project-based work*

Quality assurance resources, line managers and in-house project managers are increasingly being involved in projects. They are project managers, steering committee members, the client, the delivery manager, have to make their staff available to a project or experience the consequences of a project in their department.

The reasons for this are:

- That initiatives are increasingly executed as projects and not as line activities
- That there are no in-house project management departments with full-time project managers
- That fully outsourcing a project to an external party (supplier) doesn't work
- That hiring contractors on a large scale is impossible due to limited resources.

It is vital to master the principle of working in a project-based manner for any organization that wants to be successful. It is vital to master the principle of working in a project-based manner for any organization that wants to be successful.

It's all about the essence of project-based work

For any organization that wants to become proficient in working in a project-based manner a lot of information is available. Amazon provides more than 90 thousand books on project management. If you want to grasp the widely accepted method of Prince II, you need a five-day training and wade through a book of more than 350 pages.

So the question is clear: is all this necessary if the organization wants to reap the benefits of working in projects? ProjectBlauw defines the essence of working in a project-based manner by the following three key principles:



- Think first, act later
- Take control and keep it
- No closure without transition

In order to have and keep control of a project, there are essential issues that need to be settled before a project starts, but also while the project is being executed and during the successful completion of it.

When all relevant team members have a clear picture of the essential issues, half of the battle is won. From this point on, in-depth knowledge can be gained on the premise of one of the available extensive methods. Without a shared basis understanding of project-based work, these methods will not be effective.

Think first, act later

Objectives

There must be clarity about the intended objectives of the project. An objective consists of a description of the products to be delivered over time. By describing the objective with examples, a clear picture emerges. It is important that all parties involved see the same picture. I.e. the specialists (the team members who make the products) and the clients, customers / users and others who are involved in related projects.

Activities

When the objective is well documented, it can be determined which activities should be carried out and when, for the products to be delivered on time. These activities can be assigned either to an individual or a work team. If external suppliers are involved, work packages are outsourced to these suppliers. For these packages a clear objective of the products that need to be delivered over time will have to be defined.



Capacity

After defining the activities and the work packages, the required effort and turnaround time can be determined. This is done by listing all activities in the right order. Determining the effort and duration of one activity will result in the required deployment of people and turnaround time for the entire project. When indicating the deployment, it becomes clear per activity what the minimum turnaround time will be. The determinant factor here is availability of resources.

Dependencies

When mapping the activity sequence and the required capacity, the dependencies of the project become clear. A project can never be carried out in isolation. For a realistic planning it is therefore necessary to coordinate the dependencies of products and team members on other projects and line initiatives.

Risks

Unfortunately, the world is not compliant; we live in the real world. Estimations are made in all of the above steps, so there's always the risk that in reality things will not go as planned. By recognizing these risks and taking measures, the project can be controlled. Risks can be accepted at the start of a project (the so-called initial risks); otherwise it can never start.



Why does a project fail to start?

- It is not a project but a continuous activity
- We don't want to take any risks, so we can't start
- There is insufficient insight into the risks and no measures have been defined
- There is no client, delivery manager and / or project manager
- There are insufficient resources (employees and finances)

Staying on track

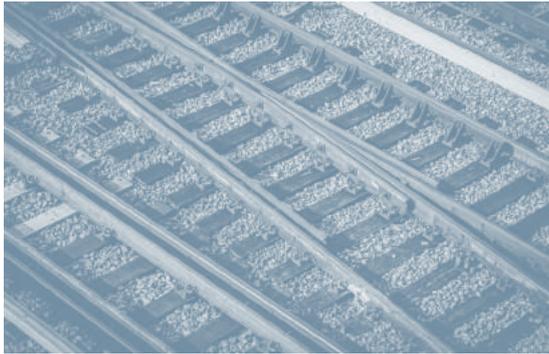
The project plan is conceived and everyone is carrying out their activities. The project manager supervises the implementation of the plan and manages any risks. Managing risks is like running 'mini-projects'; the goal is to mitigate the risk.

When the project is ongoing and everyone is executing their tasks, sections of the project plan can still change: goal, scope, budget, people and new/changed external dependencies. It is then the task of the project manager to assess whether the change can be accommodated within the project plan or whether the client needs to be involved in the adjustment.

Let's take time pressure as an example:

A project manager is looking into capacity flexibility, can someone else help out, someone who's available and can work faster, or can the same be accomplished in a different way?

By using the three variables: quality, capacity and turnaround time, the project manager can solve the issue on his own if it remains within the agreed limits. All decisions are, of course, reported to the steering committee and to the client. If no solution is possible within the limits of the project plan, a change is proposed to the steering committee. Make sure to propose multiple options. People prefer to have a choice rather than accepting *a fait accompli*.



Why do we get off track?

- There phases are not clearly defined in achievable parts
- Scope creep (moving target)
- The client is not sufficiently result-orientated
- The project manager is too focused on the content and not enough on the process
- Dependency on other projects and third parties (suppliers)

No closure without transfer

It is important to work towards a proper closure of your project. This can be done in parts. Partial results can be transitioned to line organizations or other projects (the beneficiaries). It is useful to agree upon acceptance criteria with the final beneficiary early on in the project. However, do not try to do this at the very beginning of a project, as these criteria will still be too abstract. As soon as it becomes clear what the project will deliver in concrete terms, it is possible to agree upon what is still to be realized within the project and what will be picked up by the beneficiary. After the beneficiary has taken over the project deliverables, the project manager can provide after care and remains available for questions and support.



Why is there no closure?

- No termination (keeps going on)
- No time and attention for transition to support
- No agreement on what is still part of the project and what can be picked up by a line organization or other projects
- No evaluation (learning curve)
- No appreciation / celebration of the result and the end of the project

A checklist as a means of communication

With the following checklist it can quickly be determined what the status of a project is and which activities are still to be done. It can also be used to get a conversation going with those involved in a project.

Checklist:

Project-based work: Is there sufficient control of the project?

Sufficient control to start?



- Is the objective of the project clear at least for the client and the delivery manager (and/or project manager)?
- Are the activities (at least the outline) determined that lead to the objective?
- Is there a minimum time and / or budget available for the deliver manager to carry out the activities?
- Is there a time estimate (minimum milestones) for the activities to be completed?

- If these four conditions have not been met: the project cannot start.
- If these four conditions have been met: the project can start with the following initial risks:
 - the objective is not yet clear to all involved → risk
 - not all activities (of the first phase) have been worked out in detail yet → risk
 - if there is no time and/or funding yet for all required resources → risk
 - if there is no detailed planning (for the first phase) yet → risk

Sufficient control to continue?



- Is there a process/structure to implement changes (of objective/result, resourcing, planning)?
- Consequences for all risks are clear, mitigation measures are defined and are they monitored?
- Is the objective of the current phase clear to everyone concerned?
- Have the activities of the current phase been worked out in detail?
- Is there enough time and budget available for the current phase?
- Is a detailed planning for the current phase available?

- When these six conditions have not been met: pause the project.
- When these six conditions have been met: the project can continue with the following additional risks:
 - the goal for the next phase is not yet clear for all people involved → risk
 - not all activities of the next phase have been worked out in detail yet → risk
 - if there is no time and/or funding yet for the next phase → risk
 - if there is no detailed planning yet for the next phase → risk

Is there sufficient control for closure?



- Has the result of the project been transferred to the line organization?
- Are project deliverables (information, partial results, project facilities) dealt with?
- Has the project been evaluated?
- Has aftercare been organized?

- When these four conditions have not been met: the project cannot yet be closed.
- When these four conditions have been met: the project can be closed.

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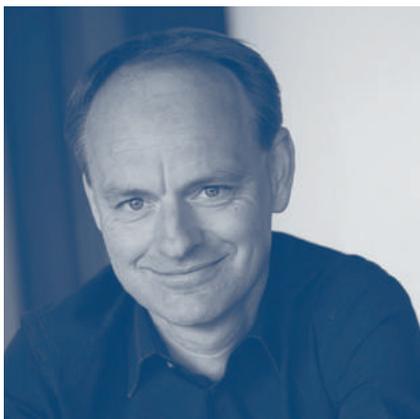
Project: reaching targets on time and within budget.

Blauw (Blue): making rational analyses, setting clear goals and planning activities.

If you want to know more about project-based work, quality control, risk management and setting up project organizations, feel free to contact ProjectBlauw.

Besides program and project management, ProjectBlauw offers one-day training sessions. Participants judge these trainings as: practical, instructive, clear, understandable, fun, applicable, structured and with a lot of personal attention.

For further information: projectblauw.nl/trainingen



Joost Dudok van Heel (author whitepaper)

Over the past 9 years I have been involved in projects and served them in different roles, such as project manager, coach of project managers and member of steering committees. My added value is to provide objective clarity about the project to those involved. I do this in specific terminology to specialists (suppliers and in-house experts) and in general terms to clients and stakeholders in the periphery of projects. This clarity is often lacking and consequently there's no control over the project. Only when there is clarity for everyone, essential issues can be determined and controlled in a project-based manner.

In my experience it is extremely useful to pay close attention to these issues at the start of a project in order to control and close a project successfully.