

# The death of project management

For years, people have put their faith in project management as a means of delivering change, whether it be new buildings, new software or business process re-engineering (BPR). Numerous academic studies confirm what anyone can see just by reading the press. In too many cases it simply doesn't work. Projects consistently underdeliver on performance whilst over-running on time and cost. Some brave souls are persisting in trying to make project management work. Many others pay lip service to the principles without really committing themselves to the concept. More often than not this is because the first thing project planning does is to tell you what you didn't want to know, i.e. you can't finish the project in those time scales with that budget and maintain that level of specification! Senior company management don't like that, so project management must be at fault.

Academics, consultants and many practitioners, including myself, have been talking about 'management by project' for some years. We are unanimous in our belief that the way to run the modern company is as a series of projects. Only in this way can the business implement necessary change in a structured and effective way. So why isn't it working?

The issues are not technical. Project management is fundamentally sound and in many cases, where a major project is undertaken outside the normal day to day business, it is successful. A new headquarters may be built for the company and successfully project managed without great impact on the running of the business, but a BPR project, an IT project or a product launch cannot be so easily separated. They become project islands within the business and this produces a culture clash. Single point accountability for a multi-

Modern project management, as typified by techniques such as critical path analysis and performance measurement, and exemplified by standards such as PRINCE and BS 6079, is 50 years old and terminally ill, writes Adrian Dooley

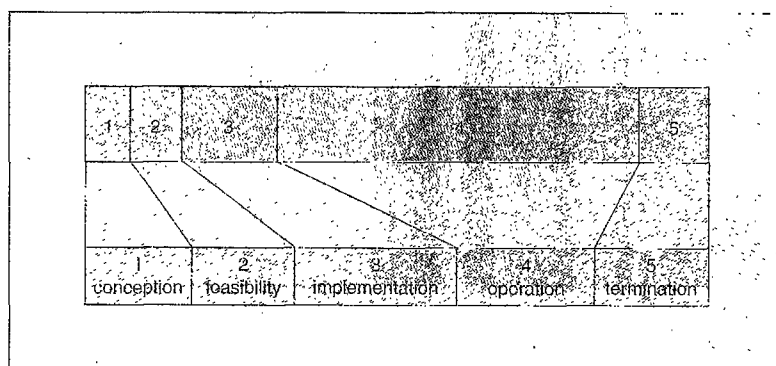
disciplinary team does not fit well in organisations which have a long history of departmental demarcation. Recognition and reward of project management does not work with career based career structures. In this environment, project management is still the newcomer and for all our protestations that management by project is the way forward, it is meeting a massive cultural barrier and often a backlash.

For project management to succeed with projects which are part of the business, project management itself must

In many influential quarters the response to this problem has been to enhance project management by adding to it, as in the recent British Standard (BS 6079), or developing complex derivatives as described in such as the Central Computer and Telecommunication Agency's (CCTA) version of programme management<sup>2</sup>. All this achieves is an increase in the terminology, a greater barrier to its adoption and contradictory views of what projects really are.

For project management to realise its full potential it has to become a fundamental part of a company's culture. Companies come in all shapes and sizes meeting all sorts of needs from service industry to manufacturing. They also have many different project requirements from IT to marketing and R&D to facilities. In order for the business community to embrace project management across the board it has to be made simpler and more flexible not more complicated and prescriptive.

A good example of this increasing complication of project management is the project lifecycle contained in BS 6079 (Fig. 1). The authors of the standard have tried to deal with the need to integrate projects with the business by greatly expanding the apparent scope of a project. Many people have a problem with regarding the entire operation of the product as part of the project lifecycle let alone the eventual termination. In



1 Project lifecycle according to BS 6079

become part of the business. This means everybody in the business being educated in project management, the role of the project manager being a key part of the career structure and management by project being the culture of the organisation. As long as projects are ring fenced and seen as an appendage to the main business, project management will continue to fail.

fact what this really describes is a product lifecycle not a project. To get project management integrated into the business we need define it in such a way as to enable the business to absorb it. What BS 6079 tries to do is absorb the business within the project.

Reference 2, the CCTA's 'A Guide to Programme Management', provides another example of project management

overkill. This takes the approach that management by project is achieved by linking projects to major business change. No problem with that in principle, but the process becomes overblown and complicated. A lot of the groundwork for the Guide was done in an article by Duncan Ferns<sup>3</sup> in which he elegantly described a programme as:

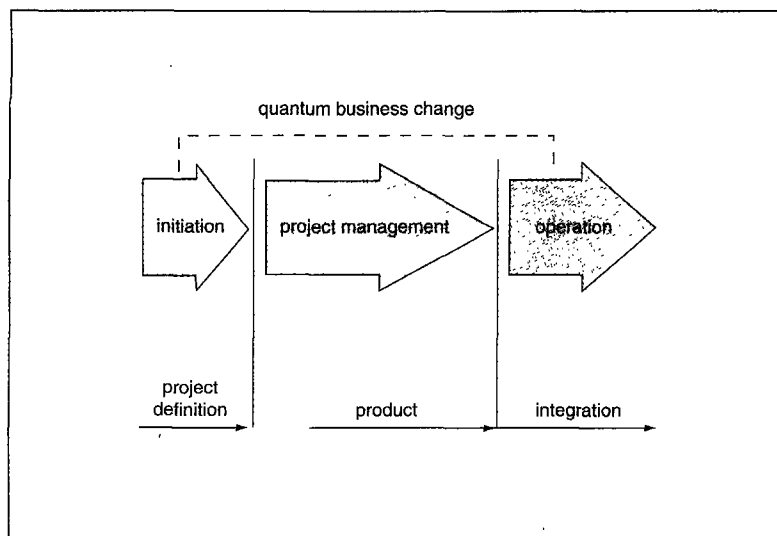
*'...a group of projects that are managed in a co-ordinated way to gain benefits that would not be possible were the projects to be managed independently.'*

By the time this was developed into the Guide it had become:

*'A portfolio of projects selected and planned in a co-ordinated way so as to achieve a set of defined business objectives, giving effect to various (and often overlapping) initiatives and/or implementing a strategy. Alternatively, a single, large or very complex project, or a set of otherwise unrelated projects bounded by a business cycle. The programme includes the controlled environment of management responsibilities, activities, documentation and monitoring arrangements by which the portfolio of projects achieve their goals and the broader goals of the project.'*

So how do we make project management work? The glib answer is: we have to make it a fundamental part of company culture. In order to do that it needs to be simple and adaptable. How that can be achieved is not something that can be done justice in a short article but the principle can be demonstrated by looking at the aspects mentioned above: a lifecycle which truly represents what a project is, and an approach to methods and procedures.

Figure 2 shows what I believe to be the simple essence of developing change in an organisation. I have used the expression quantum business change to represent the implementation of discrete chunks of change. One of the meanings of the word quantum is 'a required or allowed amount'. Using project manage-



## 2 Developing organisational change

ment is all about managing change in required and allowed amounts.

In the course of business, somebody has a bright idea or there is a need to respond to some changes in the environment. This conceptual stage may result in the birth of a project as represented by the project definition. This is where traditional project management takes over and eventually produces the change, be it a physical or organisational product. The product is then integrated, operated and eventually becomes a part of the business. The business has then changed, hopefully for the better, by a required and allowed amount.

### The first thing project planning does is to tell you what you didn't want to know

Within this simple but broad lifecycle there may be phases of conception and feasibility (*à la* BS6079) but the extent to which they exist will vary. There is also scope for concepts such as benefits management (*à la* CCTA Guide) but again this will only apply in a few cases.

Recent research has indicated that over 80% of projects have ten tasks or less, and we must start our approach to projects from this simple premise. The development of quantum management takes this elemental beginning and develops it according to the layers of the organisation to which it is being applied. Programme management (in a form closer to Ferns' original concept) can be applied to the major strategic changes and a small projects philosophy such as that promoted by

Watson<sup>4</sup> can be used at the other end of the scale. The medium to large, individual projects in between are what most existing documented processes, such as PRINCE 2<sup>5</sup>, are aimed at.

Eventually we arrive at a simple basis for viewing required and

allowed amounts of change. These quanta are of varying size and will require different derivatives of the basic process. Some will be called projects, some programmes and others simply work. Provided the processes are compatible and consistent we have the foundations of a true project based culture.

So much for the easy part. In this article I have focused on the examples of lifecycle and process. Now we have to convince the individuals who make up the organisation at all levels, that working in this way is a good idea. The philosophy of continual development by a series of projects must become the norm throughout the business.

In order to make management by project acceptable in principle and practical in application, it must be made simple, flexible and scaleable. Only then can we begin the process of training, coaching and persuasion which will enable an organisation to efficiently and effectively manage change. To develop beyond project management to quantum management.

## References

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- 2 CCTA, 'A Guide to Programme Management', The Stationery Office, 1994
- 3 FERNS, D.C. 'Developments in Programme Management' *International Journal of Project Management* Vol. 9, No. 3, August 1991
- 4 WATSON, M.: 'Managing Small Projects', *Project Manager Today* (Due for publication December 1997)
- 5 'PRINCE 2', The Stationery Office, 1996

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