

Notes on programs vs. standalone projects

By Alan Stretton

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some similarities and differences between programs and 'standalone' projects. A distinction is first made between standalone projects, and projects which are components of a program – 'component' projects. The paper is concerned only with the former.

Regarding similarities, it is shown that both programs and standalone projects have been depicted on an equal footing in organizational strategic program/project portfolios. Additionally, both cover the whole of the life cycle from concept through delivery.

We then look at an apparent contradiction in distinguishing between the two. The question, "Can a single project be called a program?" leads to a discussion about similarities and differences in the management coordination of component entities of programs, and of standalone projects. This question does not appear to have been comprehensively addressed in the literature. We first look at an example from the literature of activities involved in the coordinated management of programs, and find that they appear to have direct counterparts in the coordinated management of standalone projects. On the other hand, some significant differences are also identified from the literature. From this sampling, it appears that there are both significant similarities and differences in coordinating processes in the program and standalone project domains. Two other types of differences between programs and standalone projects are also identified.

It is concluded that, whilst there are substantial differences between programs and standalone projects, there are also substantial similarities, and that the latter deserve more recognition in the literature than they currently enjoy.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of distinguishing between standalone and component projects

In an earlier paper in this Journal (Stretton 2012e) I discussed the importance of distinguishing between standalone projects and a program's component projects. This is particularly important when comparisons are made between programs and projects. There are many such comparisons in the literature, but in most cases these comparisons are between programs and component projects. This paper is specifically concerned with comparisons between programs and standalone projects.

SIMILIARITIES BETWEEN PROGRAMS AND STANDALONE PROJECTS

Both are on the same footing as components of strategic portfolios

The following figure is adapted from *The Standard for Program Management* (PMI 2008b:10), and is augmented with descriptors which distinguish standalone projects from component projects.

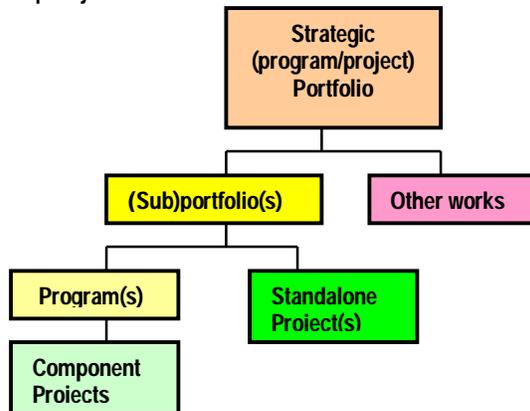


Figure 1. Adapted from PMI 2008b Figure 1-3. Portfolios, programs & projects – with augmented descriptors

It is clear that, in this context, programs and standalone projects are on the same footing.

Both cover the whole of the development cycle

Further, in Stretton 2012e, it was pointed out that both programs and standalone portfolios embrace the management of the whole development cycle from concept through delivery. This was depicted as follows.

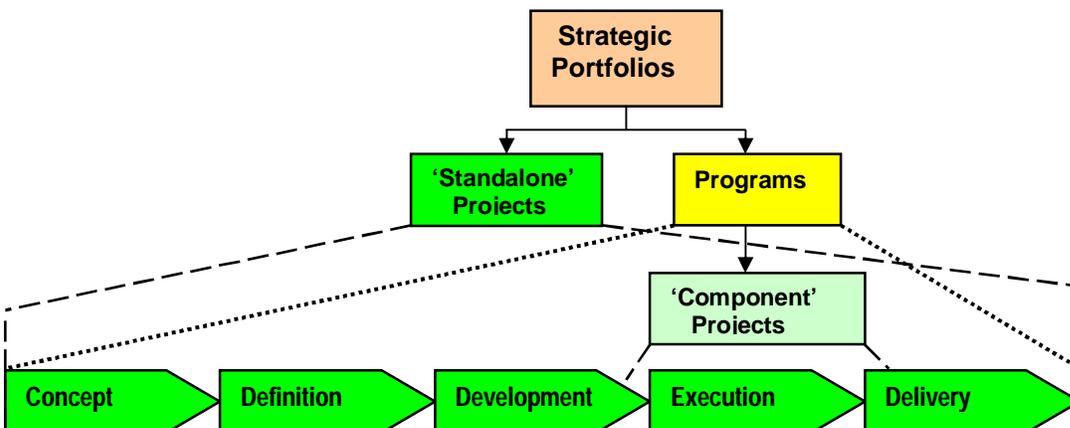


Figure 2: Adapted from Stretton 2012e, indicating spans of involvement

Therefore, in this respect also, programs and standalone projects are on the same footing.

AN APPARENT CONTRADICTION IN DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE TWO

Can a single project be called a program?

As long ago as 1993, Rodney Turner suggested that there was an equivalence between programs and 'standalone' projects, in the following way (Turner 1993:354).

Sometimes a programme consists of just a single project; one project delivers the required development.

However, this appears to contradict the most widely accepted definition of program management as involving the coordinated management of related component projects (and other works). Indeed, it also appears to contradict Turner's own words in the following page of his book (p. 355), where he defines a program as

A group of projects which are managed in a coordinated way, to deliver benefits that would not be possible were the projects managed independently.

If one accepts the latter, then a single project could not be called a program. However, if a single project is all that is needed to deliver the prescribed benefits, then it can certainly be called a standalone project in the sense already discussed.

Management coordination of component entities

In thinking about the above, it occurred to me that single standalone projects also require coordinating action by the project manager, albeit involving somewhat different entities than a program's component projects and project managers. This, in turn, led me to look a bit more closely at factors which might influence different types of management coordination in the program/project context. The first factor was the nature of, and results from, work breakdown structures (WBSs).

Work breakdown structures (WBSs)

This line of enquiry was prompted by a quote from Pellegrinelli et al 2011:5, who ask the following question about programs, projects and work packages.

How is a project similar to or different from a programme? For instance, if you substitute *work package* for *component project* and *work package manager* for *project manager*, what is substantially different in terms of approach and management coordination?

Pellegrinelli himself had already answered part of the above question in 1997, when he said

The relationship between a programme and a project is not the same as the relationship between a project and a work package. If it were, then the programme would essentially be a large project.

My own response is that many standalone projects I worked on, or was associated with, did not readily break down into work packages with their own work package managers. They had quite different WBSs (see below).

We can extend the above discussion to a broader stage, namely that of (presumably larger) projects vs. programs. Quoting Pellegrinelli et al again,

Programmes have sometimes been conceived as scaled-up versions of projects – mega-projects. (p.3)

I am not sure about this. Clearly many mega-projects break down into component projects, and therefore qualify as also being described as programs. However, there could well be exceptions. For example, from my own experience on larger standalone projects (although they were perhaps not quite in the mega-project range), most of them did not lend themselves to being broken down into discrete component projects in the way programs are – i.e. they were properly described as projects.

The WBSs for these projects took quite different forms. For example, projects such as dams, roads, and high-rise buildings tended to be organized with a strong production orientation, somewhat similar to an assembly line in a manufacturing establishment.

Summarising the above, on the one hand we have programs whose component projects require program management coordination, and on the other hand we have standalone projects which also require management coordination, but of different entities, which normally derive from their WBSs.

This prompts the rather obvious question (which is also asked in the first quotation of this section), namely “what is substantially different in terms of approach and management coordination?” – in this case between programs and standalone projects.

Differences in management coordination between programs and standalone projects?

With programs, management coordination is primarily concerned with component projects, via their project managers. As PMI 2008b:8 says

Program managers coordinate efforts between the projects but do not manage them.

Elsewhere (p.6) PMI says

Program management focuses on project interdependencies and helps to determine the optimal approach for managing them.

With standalone projects, the project manager is also concerned with coordinating interdependencies. At first glance, a project's interdependencies appear to be quite different from those between a program's component projects. However, what is actually involved in the coordinating processes may not be all that different. For example, in high-rise building construction, coordination involves ensuring, on a continuing basis, that the operations of the many trades involved in fit-out type activities dove-tail throughout, with minimum cross-trade interference. Here the project manager is dealing with the foreman (or equivalent) of each trade, rather than with a discrete project manager. However, the basic coordination processes involved could well be quite similar.

I have not seen any comparative analyses in the literature which would help give a definitive answer to the question about differences in management coordination between programs and standalone projects. We therefore turn to an example of coordinating processes in program management, and look at their applicability to standalone projects.

Apparent similarities in coordinating processes

In the following, I look at some program management coordination actions exemplified in *The Standard for Program Management* (PMI 2008b:6, quoted below), and then comment on their relevance to management coordination on standalone projects.

In programs, it is important to integrate, monitor, and control the interdependencies among the components. Program management focuses on these project interdependencies and helps to determine the optimal approach for managing them.

Actions related to these interdependencies may include [original bullet-pointed; my numbering added to facilitate discussion]:

- (1) Coordinating the supply of components, work or phases as experienced in the construction of bridges, skyscrapers, or aircraft;
- (2) For internal programs, resolving resource constraints and/or conflicts that affect multiple projects within the program;
- (3) Mitigating risk activities that run across components, such as contingency planning;
- (4) Aligning organisational/strategic direction that affects project and program goals and objectives;
- (5) Resolving issues and scope/cost/schedule/quality changes within a shared governance structure.

- (6) Tailoring program management processes and interfaces across a global program to handle culture, language, time, and distance differences.

Commenting on the above points in the context of their relevance to standalone projects:

- (1) This type of coordination applies equally on standalone projects. Indeed, in my experience, bridges and skyscrapers are normally undertaken as standalone projects.
- (2) Resolving resource constraints and/or conflicts is part and parcel of all project managers' responsibilities. It applies equally with standalone projects.
- (3) Mitigating risk activities also applies universally in the project context, and contingency planning particularly so with standalone projects.
- (4) Standalone projects in a strategic portfolio are on the same level as programs in terms of appropriate aligning of organisational/strategic direction.
- (5) Resolving issues and scope/cost/schedule/quality changes applies equally to standalone projects.
- (6) The same applies to standalone projects in a strategic portfolio.

Whilst acknowledging that this is only a sample of the types of management coordination activities that are potentially involved with programs and standalone projects, it appears there are at least some similarities between the two in the basic management coordination activities involved. However, there also appear to be some differences, as now discussed.

Apparent differences in coordinating processes

Program management is not just the sum of all project management activities but also includes management of the risks, opportunities and activities that occur "in the white spaces" between projects. (Prieto 2008)

This quotation gives the sense that managing the interfaces between component projects can be far from straightforward. Indeed, there is not much material in the literature on this subject. Yet it can be crucial, as Prieto 2008 says in the construction context.

A major source of cost and schedule growth on large complex projects is associated with inadequate interface management. These interfaces may be between the program and external stakeholders; between design and construction contractors; or between discrete construction projects.

In this quote, Prieto has extended the scope of interface management. He also makes another interesting comparison in relation to component projects.

While a single project will employ a specific project delivery approach , program management may combine different delivery approaches across multiple projects to best achieve the desired strategic business objectives.

These are examples of differences between programs and standalone projects which are concerned with coordinating a program's component projects.

In summary, it is concluded that there appear to be both similarities, and differences, between the coordinating processes involved in programs and standalone projects. However, there are also some other types of differences, two of which are now discussed.

OTHER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PROGRAMS AND STANDALONE PROJECTS

Differences associated with a program's scale and complexity

As a general rule (although not always), one can expect a program to be larger, and often more complex, than a standalone project. Prieto 2008 expresses this as follows.

The range of issues to be assessed, managed and monitored [Prieto discusses 25 issues] is characteristic of the differences between program and project management.

I have also put the following quotes from Prieto 2008 into this category.

Programmatic risk management must implement an ongoing, structured approach focused on the identification, assessment, management, mitigation and provision for a wide class of risks that transcends the sum of the risks associated with individual projects.

Program management also requires a focus on the overall program finances that transcends the considerations encountered on any one project.

Large scale programs may result in one or more projects put into beneficial use prior to completion of the overall program.

Programmatic consideration of safety should include the interaction at a human and physical level between all projects not just within the battery limits of a given project.

Significant benefits may accrue to the program through implementation of a high degree of standardization across the various projects

These are just a few examples of differences associated with a program's scale and complexity by comparison with most standalone projects.

A more distinctive difference

Sergio Pellegrinelli has long advocated a position which puts program management in quite a different domain from project management – e.g. Pellegrinelli et al 2011:5 say,

Advocates of a distinct programme management discipline have sought to distance it from the embrace of the execution-oriented project management approach and mindset (Thiry 2002, 2004, Pellegrinelli and Partington 2006, Pellegrinelli 1997, 2002, 2008), staking out programme management 'ground' and urging programme practitioners to approach their work differently.

Pellegrinelli et al 2011:7 define programs as follows.

Programmes are *frameworks* (of various *configurations*) to coordinate, communicate, align, manage and control (*primarily 'project'*) activities to achieve a desired *synergy, benefits, outcomes or vision*.

If we remove (*primarily 'project'*) from this definition (or perhaps substitute *WBS*), it seems to me that this would equally well define standalone projects in the context we have described them above. This interpretation tends to be reinforced by another quotation by Pellegrinelli et al 2011:5.

Our position is that projects can and do stand alone, outside a programme framework, and that managers of such *independent* projects strive to achieve their objectives within their business and societal contexts. Not all projects are, or need be, *components* of a programme, bereft of their own strategy and direct contribution to important organisational or societal goals.

I have therefore had some real problems with understanding discussions by Pellegrinelli et al 2011 that immediately follow their definition of 'programmes' (above). These discussions begin as follows:

A (goal-oriented) programme's vision and hence its success criteria are usually more *strategic*, such as the creation of competitive advantage, national security or enhanced social welfare, and so programme outcomes are *less tangible* than might be found in or desired of projects.

This is followed by many more examples of how they see programs differing from projects. Essentially they are saying that programs are most appropriate for situations which are "complex, ambiguous, fluid and unstable".

They imply, quite directly, that project management is only appropriate to situations which are non-complex, non-ambiguous, and essentially stable. This is in spite of the

fact that there are substantial materials in the literature which refute this restrictive perception of the nature of project management, and which appear to have been ignored.

My basic problem with the above is that none of these alleged differences follow from their definition of 'programmes'. In the contexts discussed to date, programs and standalone projects would be virtually identical. I confess to being what Pellegrinelli et al describe as a sceptic in relation to their advocacy. The way I see it, they could equally as well use the terminology 'standalone projects' in the same context as they use 'programs'.

This is not to denigrate Pellegrinelli et al's paper in any way. On the contrary, in spite of (or because of?) my disagreeing with some of its initial propositions and conclusions, I see it as a significant scholarly contribution to the project management literature. I think the difference in perspective between myself and the authors was quite neatly summed up by Pellegrinelli himself in a separate paper (Pellegrinelli 2011):

While debates on paradigm commensurability or incommensurability may interest few practitioners, they matter within an academic or research community.

As a former practitioner, I rest my case on this particular perceived difference, whilst acknowledging that others see things differently.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

This paper has been concerned with identifying similarities and differences between programs and standalone projects. It was first emphasized that this paper is concerned with standalone projects, and not component projects of programs, which are quite different entities.

The dominant similarities between the two are that both share equal footing as components of strategic program/project portfolios, and that both cover the whole of the development process from concept through delivery.

An apparent contradiction in distinguishing between programs and standalone projects led to a preliminary investigation about similarities and differences in the coordinated management of each, from which it is concluded that there are both substantial similarities, and substantial differences. Two further types of differences between the two were also discussed.

It was concluded that, whilst there are substantial differences between programs and standalone projects, there are also substantial similarities. The literature tends not to make distinctions between standalone and component projects, which leads to some confusion when comparisons are made between programs and projects. Even when such distinctions are made, there is a tendency to focus on the differences between

programs and standalone projects. However, it has been established here that there are also substantial similarities between the two, and it is contended that these should be given more recognition in the literature than they currently receive.

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