

Programs, 'standalone' & 'component' projects, and perceptions of scope of project management applicability

By Alan Stretton

ABSTRACT

This paper first discusses initiation of programs and their 'component' projects, and of 'standalone' projects. Few writers specifically distinguish between 'standalone' and 'component' projects. This can, and does, result in misinterpretation and/or confusion, and an example is given. To avoid this, it is contended that in many (if not most) contexts, writers should specify which type of project they are discussing.

The paper then moves on to a discussion of two different perspectives in the literature on the scope of project management. One is a traditional 'narrow' perspective, which focuses on project execution. The other is a 'broader' perspective, which adds involvement in managing front-end, delivery-end, and factors external to execution.

A model is then developed which links 'component' and 'standalone' projects with 'narrow' and 'broader' perspectives of the scope of project management. The 'broader' perspective (which is linked to the whole project development cycle), is associated with 'standalone' projects. The 'narrow' perspective (linked with the execution phase of the project development cycle) is associated with 'component' projects. A somewhat similar distinction is made in relation to the management of external factors.

It is concluded that 'broader' perspectives of the scope of project management are particularly appropriate for 'standalone' projects, whilst 'narrow' perspectives are more appropriate for 'component' projects of programs.

INTRODUCTION

This paper first discusses differences between 'standalone' projects and 'component' projects of a program. Generalised statements about project management are often valid for one, but not the other, and this frequently causes confusion, as is exemplified.

The paper then moves to a second topic, which involves two different perceptions in the literature about the scope of project management. One perception is a relatively 'narrow' execution-focused perspective, whilst the other 'broader' perception adds management of front-end and delivery-end activities, and of external factors.

Finally, the paper develops links between these two topics.

'STANDALONE' AND 'COMPONENT' PROJECTS

In a paper in *PM World Today* (Stretton 2010c) I discussed the importance of distinguishing between 'standalone' (or 'independent') projects, and 'component' projects of a program. This is seldom done in the literature, resulting in substantial confusion in some situations.

In that paper, I postulated the rather generic perspective that programs and projects are initiated through recognitions of broader needs/opportunities that cannot reasonably be satisfied within normal operational or equivalent processes. If a single project is all that is needed to satisfy these needs, I have labelled it a 'standalone' (or 'independent') project. If two or more inter-related projects are required, they are typically organised as programs. Projects within a program are labelled 'component' projects.

In the literature, initiation of programs and/or projects is most commonly associated with implementation of strategic objectives. Van Den Broecke illustrates this as follows.

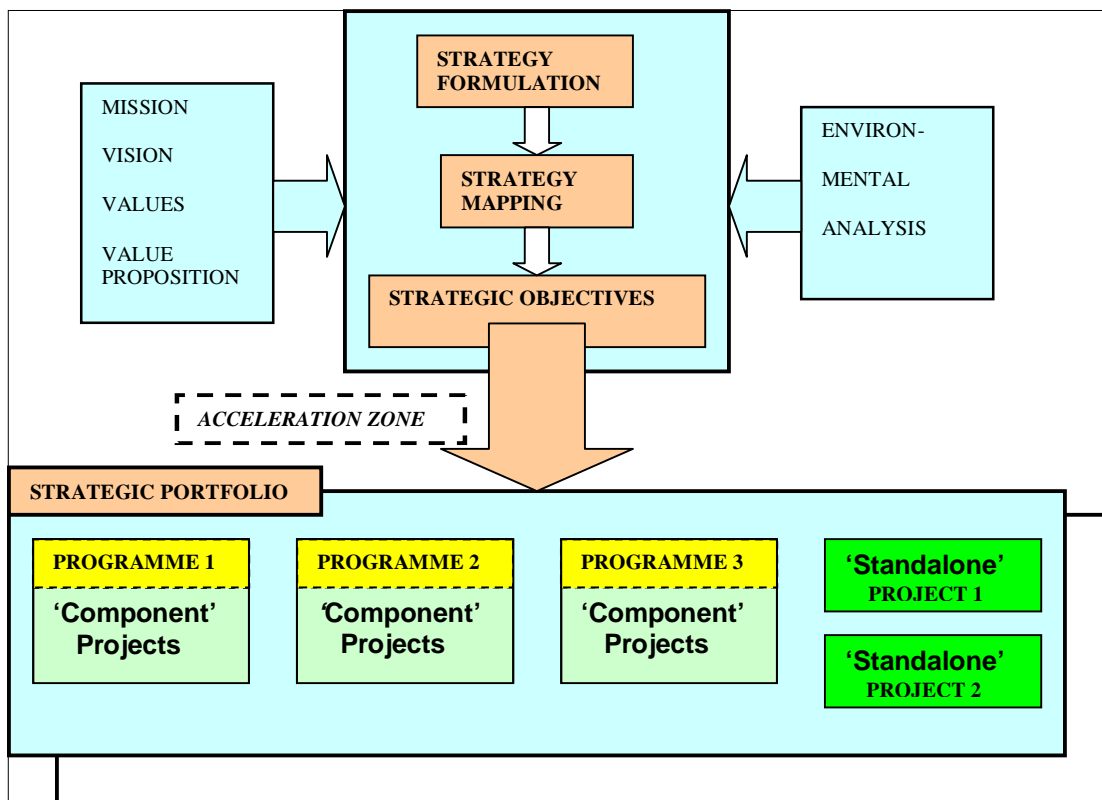


Figure 1: Van Den Broecke 2005 P/p slide "Where do (strategic) programmes come from?"

This diagram shows strategic objectives being implemented via a strategic portfolio, which, in this case, comprises a mixture of programs and projects. I have added 'Component' Projects to Programmes 1 - 3, and 'Standalone' to Projects 1 & 2.

A similar depiction of (strategic) portfolios comprising programs and 'standalone' projects comes from PMI 2006b. The following is part of a broader diagram. The original is on the left hand side, and is reproduced with augmented descriptors on the right.

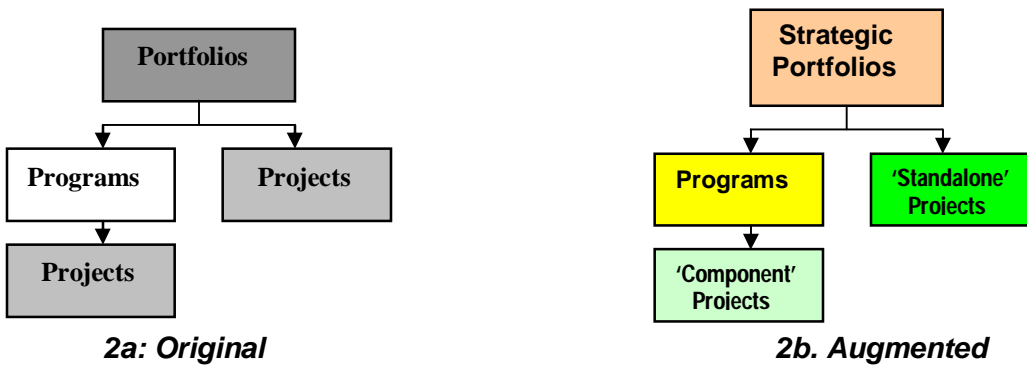


Figure 2: Part of PMI 2006b, Figure 1-1. Portfolio Relationships – Example.

The diagrams in Figures 1 and 2 are concerned with implementing strategic objectives via strategic portfolios. They also identify both programs (with their 'component' projects) and 'standalone' projects as being involved in such implementation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN 'STANDALONE' AND 'COMPONENT' PROJECTS

Few writers consciously distinguish between 'standalone' and 'component' projects, and this can, and frequently does, cause confusion and/or misunderstanding. For example, as I pointed out in Stretton 2010c, several authors make comparisons between programs and projects, but often they are talking about 'component' projects of a program, rather than about 'standalone' projects, without actually spelling this out.

I exemplified this with a comparison table derived from PMI 2006a, Table 1.1, part of which is reproduced here.

Projects	Programs
1. Projects have a narrow scope with specific deliverables 2. The project manager tries to keep change to a minimum 3. Success is measured by budget, on time, and products delivered to specification 4. Project managers are team players who motivate using their knowledge and skills	Programs have a wide scope that many have to change to meet the benefit expectations of the organisation Program managers have to expect change and even embrace it Success is measured in terms of Return on Investment (ROI), new capabilities, and benefit delivery Program managers are leaders providing vision and leadership

Figure 3: Derived from PMI 2006a: Table 1.1 Comparative overview of project, program, and portfolio management

In this example, PMI 2006a is evidently talking about ‘component’ projects under the Project heading. In the case of a ‘standalone’ project, the project manager would need to cover the Program sections of items 1 to 4.

In contexts like this, there is an obvious need for authors to specify whether they are talking about ‘component’ or ‘standalone’ projects (or both when applicable). Other project management contexts where such differentiation is often relevant include discussions on project management bodies of knowledge, competency standards, credentialing processes, education, and external perceptions of project management.

Pellegrinelli et al 2011 are amongst the few authors who explicitly acknowledge the difference between ‘component’ and ‘standalone’ (‘independent’) projects.

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.

This quotation introduces a discussion on alternative perspectives of the scope of project management.

‘NARROW’ AND ‘BROADER’ PERSPECTIVES OF THE SCOPE OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

By ‘narrow’ perspectives of the scope of project management I refer to what Morris and others have described as execution-focused perceptions of project management. For example, Morris et al 2006 discuss PMI’s *PMBOK Guide* thus:

The *PMBOK Guide* reflects a strong execution orientation, having hardly any material on strategy and project definition, the management of external factors, or human behaviour. The PMBOK view of the discipline has become extremely pervasive, so much so that many people do not see project management as the discipline of managing projects but as the discipline of delivery a project 'on time, in budget, to scope', leaving it to other disciplines to deal with the establishment of these targets.

As this quotation indicates, the *PMBOK Guide* is very widely used, and its execution-focused perspective has been widely accepted as the norm. Moreover, as Morris et al also note, broader issues such as strategy and project definition, and management of external factors, receive little attention under this perspective.

'Broader' perspectives on the scope of project management applicability not only include involvement in front-end activities and managing external factors, but also frequently include delivery-end involvement as well.

As long ago as 1993, Morten Fangel published a "Comment" on "The broadening of project management" (Fangel 1993). He identified ten broadening trends, including the following, which covers both front-end and delivery-end involvement.

- *from* a focus on the period from contracting up until commissioning, *towards* handling the entire lifecycle from conception to the full-scale utilisation of the project outcome,

More recently, Morris 2004 depicted this type of broader perspective as follows.



Figure 4: Morris 2004, Figure 2: the generic project development cycle

Winter, Smith, et al 2006 discussed three groups of (then) recent studies in relation to the discipline of project management as a whole, and noted that

These studies emphasise a broader view of projects, recognising the importance of the front-end, and of managing exogenous factors, as well as the more 'execution-focused' endogenous ones.

Thus, Winter, Smith et al include managing both front-end and external factors in their 'broader' context. Importantly, they also do not neglect the contribution of execution-focused materials to the overall management of 'standalone' projects. This confirms the point that execution-focused materials apply to both types of projects, but are only part of what is required for the effective management of 'standalone' projects.

LINKING 'COMPONENT' AND 'STANDALONE' PROJECTS WITH 'NARROW' AND 'BROADER' PERSPECTIVES OF THE SCOPE OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

We can link Figure 2b (here mirror-imaged), Figure 4, and 'narrow' and 'broader' perspectives of the scope of project management applicability, as follows.

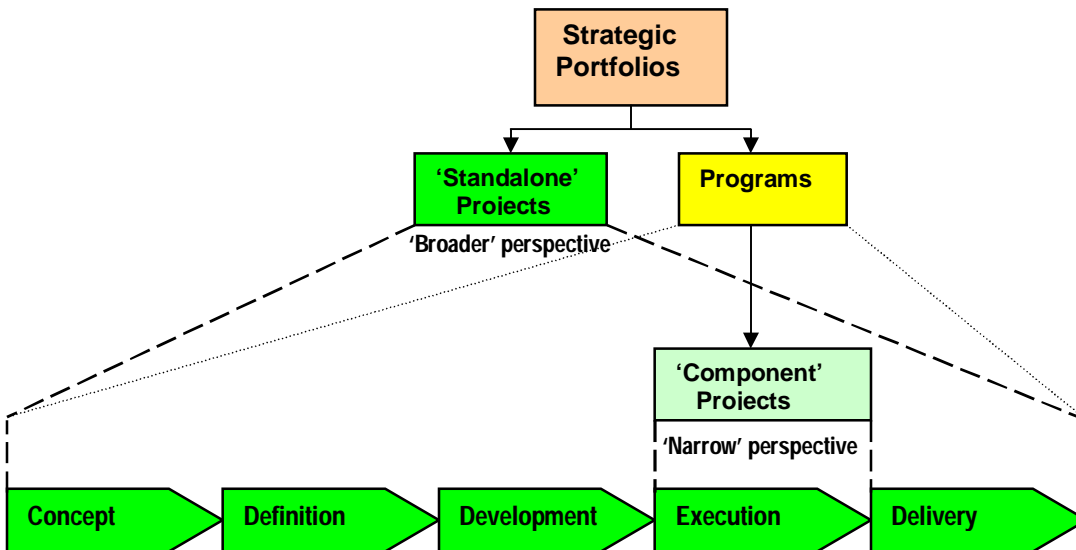


Figure 5: Linking Figure 2b with Figure 4, indicating spans of relevance/perspectives

Figure 5 links 'broader' perspectives of the scope of project management applicability with 'standalone' projects, which are shown as covering the whole of the generic project development cycle. This suggests that 'broader' perspectives of project management scope are decidedly appropriate to the management of 'standalone' projects.

[A qualifying note is that, when programs/projects are initiated via organisational strategic planning, it may be that the concept stage of the project development cycle has already been covered in the strategic planning process, and possibly some of the definition stage as well. The extent of such prior coverage will depend on just how the strategic planning processes have been undertaken].

Corresponding links between programs and the whole cycle suggest that the scope of this 'broader' perspective is roughly equivalent to the corresponding scope of a program, (interpreting Morris' generic development cycle in the context of program development).

Another key link is between 'narrow' perspectives of the scope of project management and 'component' projects, which are depicted as covering only the execution phase of the generic project development cycle.

This linking suggests that 'narrow', or execution-focused perspectives of the scope of project management are well suited to the requirements for managing individual 'component' projects. This is because management of the latter would not have substantial involvement in front-end and delivery-end management, which would be largely covered by the program management team.

A similar situation appears to apply with the management of external (exogenous) factors. Clearly the managers of 'standalone' projects must manage all external factors, and are therefore in the 'broader' perspective environment. However, managers of 'component' projects are likely to find that their engagement with external factors will necessarily be limited to what the program management team is willing and able to delegate, and are therefore more likely to be in the 'narrow' perspective zone.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper first discussed initiation of programs and their 'component' projects, and of 'standalone' projects. Initiation via strategic planning was discussed in the context of two sets of diagrams from the literature which showed strategic objectives being implemented via strategic portfolios, and which specifically identified both programs (with their 'component' projects) and 'standalone' projects as being typically involved.

It was then pointed out that few writers distinguish between 'standalone' and 'component' projects, and that this can, and does, result in misinterpretation and/or confusion. An example was given from a program/project comparison. It was concluded that in many (if not most) contexts, writers need to specify whether they are talking about 'component' or 'standalone' projects (or both where applicable).

We then moved to a discussion of two different perspectives of the scope of project management which appear in the literature. One is a traditional 'narrow' perspective, whose focus is very much on the execution of the project. The other is a 'broader' perspective which adds involvement in front-end, delivery-end, and external factors to the project execution process.

A model was then developed which linked 'component' and 'standalone' projects with 'narrow' and 'broader' perspectives of project management scope. A 'broader' perspective, which is linked with the whole project development cycle, was associated with 'standalone' projects; whilst a 'narrow' perspective, which is linked with the execution phase of the cycle, was associated with 'component' projects,

It was also noted that a similar situation appears to apply with the management of external (exogenous) factors. The managers of 'standalone' projects must manage all external factors, and are therefore in the 'broader' perspective environment, whilst managers of 'component' projects will tend to have many of these external factors

covered by the program management team, and are therefore often more likely to be in the 'narrow' perspective zone.

In conclusion, it is suggested that 'broader' perspectives of the scope of applicability of project management are particularly appropriate for 'standalone' projects, whilst 'narrow' perspectives are more appropriate for 'component' projects of programs.

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