

Series on Project Successes and Failures¹

Article 6 of 6

Summaries and post-scripts

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

This is the final article of a series of six articles on project successes and failures. The five previous articles, which constitute the main body of this series, were:

1. Some deficiencies in data on project successes and failures (Stretton 2014j)
2. Some deficiencies in published causes of project failures (Stretton 2015a)
3. Factors affecting Level 1: “Project management” success (Stretton 2015b)
4. Approaches to increasing Level 2: “Project” success (Stretton 2015c)
5. Approaches to increasing Level 3: “Business” success (Stretton 2015d)

The first two articles, and the first half of the third, were primarily concerned with exploring deficiencies in data on project success / failure rates, both current and over longer terms, on causes of failure, and differences in criteria used for establishing success / failure.

The latter half of the third article, and the fourth, were primarily concerned with the initiation phases of projects, and the need to get vastly increased involvement by project management in these phases (where this does not already occur), to ensure that the right projects are being done. The fifth articles extended such involvement even further back, into organizational strategic planning.

This article summarises key findings from these articles, and adds some post-scripts on these findings, mainly relevant to the project management community at large.

DEFICIENCIES IN PROJECT SUCCESS / FAILURE DATA

Summaries and recommendations in the first two articles

Several types of deficiency in published data on project successes / failures were first identified.

- Different project success/failure criteria are being used by different people
- Project success/failure rates data are sparse in most areas
- The data on causes of failure are meagre indeed

¹ This series of articles on project successes and failures is by Alan Stretton, PhD (Hon), Life Fellow of AIPM (Australia), a pioneer in the field of professional project management and one of the most widely recognized voices in the practice of program and project management. Long retired, Alan is still accepting some of the most challenging research and writing assignments; he is a frequent contributor to the *PM World Journal*. See his author profile can be found at the end of the article.

These deficiencies indicate, first, that we simply do not have consistent, comparable validated data on project successes / failures rates for most project types and/or application areas. The best data we have are for software projects and mega-projects. In both areas, there appears to be broad agreement that project failure rates are a good deal higher than they should be. If this applies for these two types of projects, what is the situation with other project types and/or application areas? We simply do not know.

Deficiencies with data are even more evident when it comes to causes of failure, where the available data are much too meagre to be seen as representative in any area.

The above led to the following summarising conclusions/suggestions at the end of the second article.

A suggestion (or challenge) here is for global project management organisations (IPMA, PMI, apfpm, etc) to jointly create a framework to develop and share project success/ failure data, covering the widest possible range of project management types and application areas. This would include

- ***Developing and agreeing common criteria for project success/ failure;***
- ***Collecting and sharing validated data on success/ failure rates;***
- ***Researching and sharing validated data on success drivers/ failure causes.***

I nominated global project management organizations because they would appear to be the only members of the project management community who have the coverage to initiate such a framework, and to undertake such data collection/collation.

Levels of success in the project context

Another perspective on success in the project context was introduced early on. Three writers had identified three basic levels of success, which I described as follows (combining descriptors by Dalcher 2014, and Cooke-Davies 2004):

Level 1: “Project management” success – “Was the project done right?”

Level 2: “Project” success – “Was the right project done?”

Level 3: “Business” success – “Was the right project done right, time after time?”

These three levels of success became increasingly significant in the development of this series, as is now introduced.

Two dominant causes of failure in the project context

Although the cause-of-failure sampling was very meagre, and could not be seen as really representative, the dominance of two cause-of-failure groups appeared to be too pronounced to ignore. These were project initiation-related (40% of total), and operational-related (30% of total) causes of failure.

These were then examined (in reverse order), initially in the context of how they related to Level 1: “Project management” success – “Doing the project right”, in the third article.

Project management operational-related causes of failure and Level 1

It was first noted that most of the eleven components of operational-related failures are standard items common to most project management standards and educational programs. This naturally led to the question as to how effective the broader project management community’s efforts have been in setting standards, educational programs, etc.

We simply do not have the hard data on project success / failure trends over time which would help answer this question, and help guide us on the next steps to take. This led to an extension of the above suggestion (or challenge) as follows.

It seems reasonable to suggest that, if we continued to collect and build on such data, over a period of time we would have solid validated trend data, and therefore be in a properly informed position to assess the ongoing effectiveness of our educational and allied efforts to improve project management operational performance, and to take appropriate actions.

KEY RELEVANCES OF PROJECT INITIATION-RELATED CAUSES OF FAILURE

Project initiation-related causes of failure and Levels 1 and 2

Project initiation causes of failure rather obviously directly affect Success Level 2: “Project” success – “doing the right project”. It is also clear that deficiencies in any of the activities related to the fifteen project initiation-related causes of failure will flow on to adversely affect subsequent operational activities of the project life cycle, making it more difficult, if not impossible, to “do the project right”. This raised the question

If the “right project” is not being done, due to failures in project initiation, how relevant does “doing the project right” become?

This turned out to be a highly non-trivial question. The way I saw it, in order to “do the project right”, it is first necessary to ensure that “the right project is being done”. Possible exceptions are “execution-only” situations, such as traditional construction contracting. However, the latter is a much more restricted activity than full project management in the sense we have been concerned with in this series. Therefore, I stand by the above perspective on ensuring that “the right project is being done”.

Implications for individual project managers

If a project fails because it is not the “right project”, the project manager will generally be blamed for the failure, even if the project was “done right”, (or as near as you can get to “right” with defective project initiation). Therefore, in most cases the individual project manager has a strong vested interest in ensuring that all project initiation activities have been properly done – i.e. that the “right project” is being undertaken – before agreeing to manage the operational project phases.

If the project initiation activities have not been properly done, the prudent project manager should decline to undertake the project. This was certainly the approach taken by my employers who provided project management services to external clients, and I know of other project practitioners who do the same. I am, of course, well aware that some others who provide such project management services do not follow this approach. However, I believe that, if they continue to provide such services without ensuring that the project initiation has been properly and professionally undertaken, they are doing a disservice to their own longer-term prospects, as well as to the project management community at large.

In summary, it is my contention that project managers must ensure that the project initiation has been properly done, and thence that the “right project” is being undertaken.

Implications for the project management community

As just noted, when a project fails because it is not the “right project”, the project manager will generally be blamed for the failure, even if the project was “done right”. However, in such cases, not only does the individual project manager lose some credibility, but the project management community at large also loses elements of credibility, which can cumulate if this happens too often.

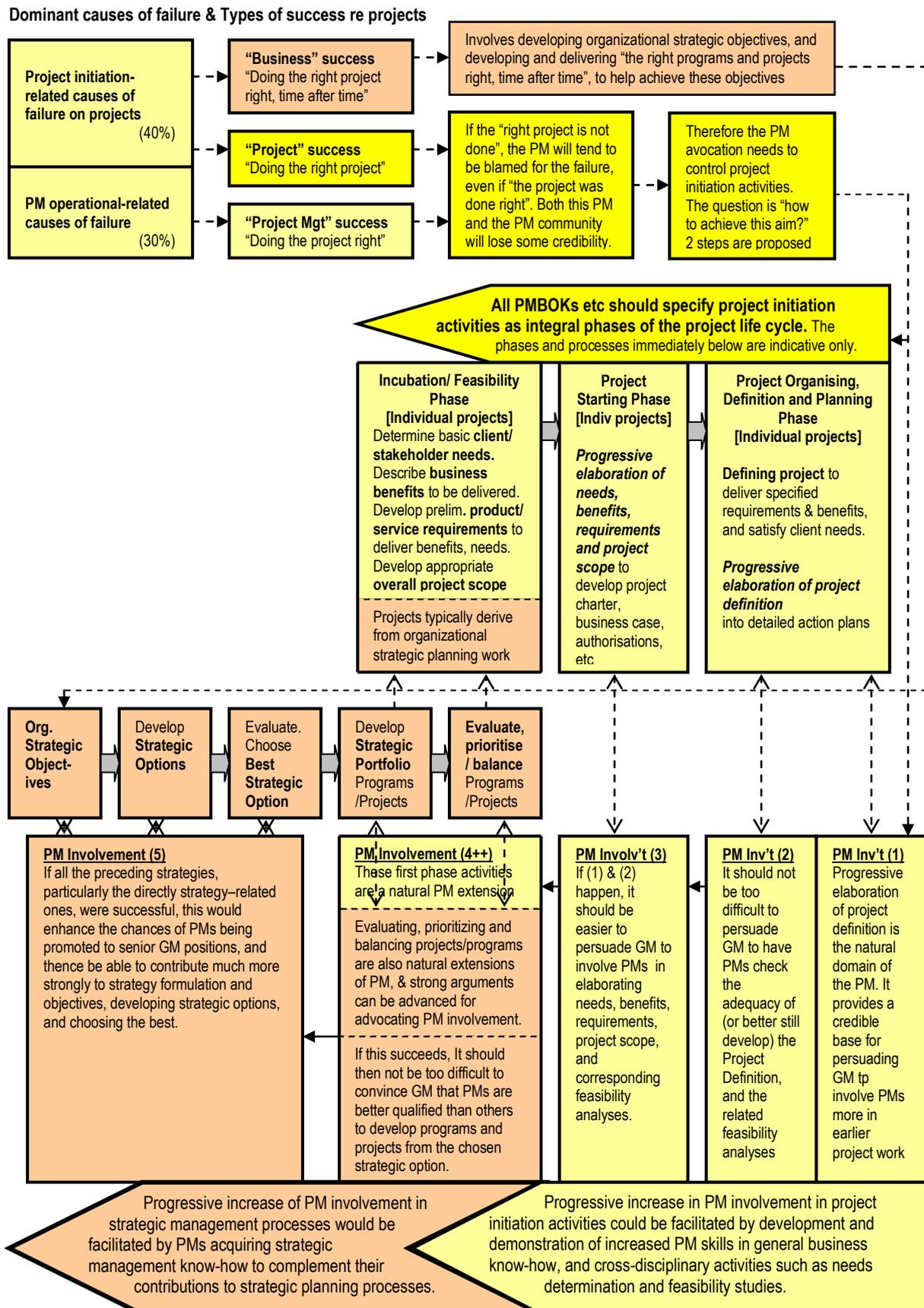
For the project management community, it was concluded that it should do all it can to get into the position of directly influencing, and ultimately controlling, all aspects of project initiation.

It was further recommended that all bodies of knowledge of project management, competency standards, educational programs and the like should include specific coverage of all project initiation phases.

Finally, it was concluded that the best way for project managers to ensure that the project initiation has been properly done is to become directly involved in the initiation activities. Ways of achieving this, particularly in production-based organizations, are addressed in the fourth and fifth papers of this series.

These approaches are amalgamated and summarized in Figure 6-1 below.

Figure 6-1: "Steps towards getting PM more fully involved in project initiation".



The amalgamation of processes in Figure 6-1 is necessarily compressed, but hopefully represents the essence of what is described in greater detail in the earlier articles.

A POST-SCRIPT ON IMPLICATIONS FOR PROJECT MANAGERS

The third article of this series briefly discussed expanding the project manager's role in the context of Naughton's Talent Triangle (Naughton 2013), and the three levels of project success, as follows.

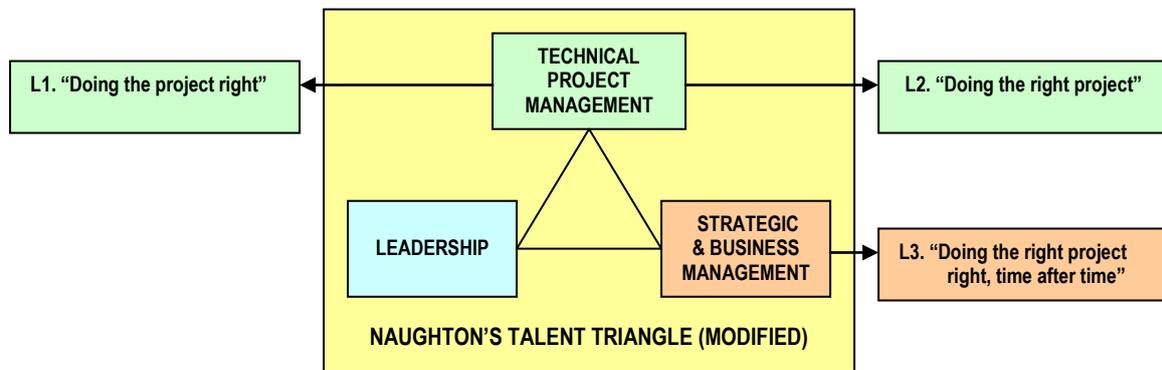


Figure 6-2 (orig. Fig. 3-3): Naughton's Talent Triangle, and the three success levels for projects

Increasing success rates at L2: "Doing the right project" in Figure 6-2 was the subject of the fourth article in this series, and is summarised in the first four yellow "PM Involvement" steps in Figure 6-1 above. As indicated in the lower yellow block arrow, project managers will need to acquire additional skills to successfully increase their involvement in project initiation, broadly along the following lines.

- Individual project managers should first be able to demonstrate skills in managing these initiation phases
- They should also be able to demonstrate business know-how as well as project management know-how
- And they should be able to communicate effectively with senior general management

In like manner, increasing success rates at L3: "Doing the right project right, time after time" was the subject of the fifth article in this series, and is summarized in the more darkly shaded (tan-coloured) lower sections of Figure 6-1. As indicated in these block arrows, increased involvement in these strategic planning processes would be facilitated by project managers doing the following:

- Extending their general business know-how
- Progressively acquiring strategic management know-how and skills, which, when coupled with project management skills in progressive elaboration, are seen to
- Adding value to the strategic management processes

These also have implications for the project management community, particularly in terms of extending education programs to cover these new types of skills. However, there are other implications for the project management community, as now discussed.

SOME POST-SCRIPTS ON IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PM COMMUNITY

Moving on from “execution-only” perspectives

The “execution-only” practice with which I am most familiar is traditional construction contracting. My position is that I do not regard this as a fundamental element of project management, because it commonly separates design and construction responsibilities, and thence does not have the single-responsibility attribute which I regard as an integral part of project management.

However, separation of project initiation from project delivery is an equally “execution-only” practice. It appears to be the case that significant sections of the project management community still have the perspective that project management is such a practice, focused on delivering a project within specified time/cost/scope objectives. This is what we have described as a Success Level 1 perspective – i.e. “doing the project right”. PMI’s PMBOK Guide has frequently been cited as representing this perspective. For example Morris et al 2006 say:

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.

It has been argued in this series that project management should be involved from the very beginning of initiation processes, whether it be via needs-and-requirements determination leading up to project definition, as developed in the fourth article of the series, or even more fundamentally via organisational strategic planning, and thence establishing the strategic portfolio of projects to implement the strategic plan, as discussed in the fifth article. I believe we are increasingly moving this way, and hopefully arguments in this series may help accelerate this process.

However, this is not enough on its own. We also need a reduction of “execution-only” perspectives in the broader community, particularly within the ranks of general management, if we are going to make significant inroads into first influencing, and then controlling, project initiation processes. A series of processes involving progressive infiltration have been recommended in the fourth and fifth articles, but more is needed.

The earlier recommendation that all bodies of knowledge of project management, competency standards, educational programs and the like should include specific coverage of all project initiation phases has particular relevance as regards general management perceptions of project management. As Morris et al 2006 say,

....if project management is defined using the PMBOK Guide paradigm then it is not particularly surprising that senior managers are reported as thinking that project managers should not be involved in strategic issues or project definition, or procurement, as research by Crawford for example recently reported.

There are some other considerations relating to implications of the earlier recommendations for the project management community, as follows.

Moving project management from a 'product' to a 'client' orientation

For very many years I have been arguing that the project management community's focus continues to be on the product it produces – i.e. the project – rather than on the broader ends to which the project contributes, which has to do with benefits to customers and key stakeholders. Hopefully this is starting to change a little, with increasing emphasis on the latter. However, we still have a long way to go.

If we look at the interaction of project management and general management in a broader context, this product orientation is reflected by a project management perspective I have heard all too often, which says, in effect (to put it crudely), "Look here, general managers/ senior executives, we have this terrific product called project management, which you should be using. Now why don't you (unaware lot) wake up to yourselves, and use our splendid product?" If you put yourself into the unaware general manager's shoes, how would you react to such an exhortation? Not very positively, I would imagine.

I believe that the project management community has failed to effectively communicate a "sympathetic" image to the general management community – using the descriptor "sympathetic" in the sense of suggesting and/or illustrating potential benefits accruing to general management through appropriately embracing project management.

The alternative to a product orientation is a client orientation. This focuses on the needs of the client/customer – in this general case, senior general management at large, and the organisation's customers.

I have written extensively on the primary importance of determining/confirming the needs of individual clients/client organisations in the project context (e.g. Stretton 2013e, 2010n, 2009h, 2009c). These contributions have mainly derived from direct experience, both personal, and via the experiences of many colleagues in this context.

I cannot claim equivalent depth of experience in the much broader domain where the clients are senior general managers at large, and in a multitude of contexts. However, it seems self-evident that project management would benefit from a stronger client orientation in these broader contexts.

Putting it another way, project managers should never forget that, from a client's perspective, a project is simply a means to help achieve the client's broader ends. This understanding should always be paramount in all communications with the client.

We now look a little further into the latter, in the senior general management context.

Communicating more effectively with senior general management

There are substantial materials in the project management literature about how important projects are to business (or equivalent operational) success. This seems transparently obvious to project managers. However, as implied above, it is evidently far from obvious to substantial numbers, if not the majority, of general management people.

The direct implication is that project management has failed to communicate effectively with senior general management. As just discussed, I believe this is substantially due to a prevailing product orientation of the project management community. However, a switch to a client orientation will need to be accompanied by substantially improved communications with the general management clients.

Effective communications with general management are high on the list of Ed Merrow's plan to redefine project management in the mega-project context, as reported by Klaver 2012 [order of bullet points changed].

His plan to redefine project management for large projects is based heavily on communication and education, as well as

- A greatly strengthened capability to communicate effectively to those who do not understand the havoc they create;
- The skill and willingness to speak the truth to power and do so effectively.
- More business education for project professionals;
- To see ourselves and to be seen as equal partners with the businesses in creating successful capital assets;

The first two bullet points are directly concerned with more effective communications. The third bullet point on business education was briefly discussed in "A post-script on implications for project managers". The final point is one of self-perception, at the other end of the scale from "execution-only" perceptions.

Implications for professionalization

Many in the project management community aspire to have project management recognized as a profession in the sense which I termed the "specific interpretation" in Stretton 2013g – i.e. in the way that law and medicine are recognized as specific professions in the UK and Australia, for example.

I suggest that if project managers do not directly control the whole of their field of practice – i.e. if they do not control all project initiation phases and activities – their chances of being recognized as a profession in the above sense are seriously jeopardized. Perhaps this may provide extra motivation for some to get serious about controlling project initiation activities.

SUMMARY / CONCLUSIONS

The main points of this series of articles on project successes / failures were summarised in the first part of this final article. These were followed by some post-scripts, which were broadly concerned with ways and means of developing more user-friendly images of project management in the general management community.

Finally, I can only hope that some representative project management institutes/ associations, and individual project managers, will pick up and run with the challenges posed in these articles.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A final “thank you” to my AIPM colleague Bill Young for his help in critiquing this series of articles, which has led to substantial improvements from earlier drafts. However, all deficiencies remain my responsibility.

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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 140 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.

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