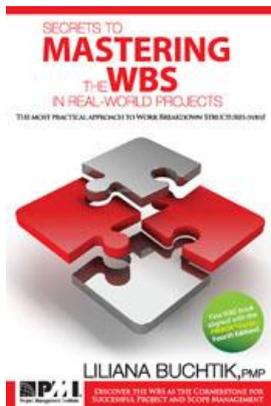


## PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW



Book Title: ***Secrets to Mastering the WBS in Real World Projects, second edition***

Author: **Liliana Buchtik, PMP, PMI-RMP**

Publisher: Project Management Institute

List Price: US\$ 39.95      Format: soft cover, 207 pages

Publication Date: 2013      ISBN: 978-1-62825-033--6

Reviewer: **S. Lance Van Nostrand**

Review Date: September 2016

### Introduction

I read this book as part of my rapid preparation for running a complex deadline driven program to deploy the systems and produce VR content for the Rio 2016 games. With a geographically diverse workforce and many projects to complete I felt the need to subjugate the schedule and task details from the deliverables. Having all my teams focused on the deliverables made it easier for PMs to make team specific plans, schedules and detailed requirements to align to the overall schedule. Where alignment was difficult, focus groups would resolve issues without disturbing other teams.

A stated goal of the author, Liliana Buchtik, is to “keep it simple”, provide how-to examples, show alignment with the PMBOK, and clarify how creation of a WBS helps address the project management problem of scope management. I found this an excellent launch point for me as it provided a quick and practical guide to brush up on the theory since the needs of my practice did not allow for a deep theoretical study.

### Overview of Book’s Structure

Twelve chapters for a book of 200 (approx.) pages kept each major topic a bite sized piece that could be consumed quickly during breaks in my day. Diagrams and bulleted lists helped convey ideas efficiently and propels the reader through the material. Half the book defines the WBS and its practical advantages in scope definition, the second half discusses application of the technique within the larger project phases of inception, execution/QA, monitor and control, delivery. Chapters 9 and 10 specifically discusses how a WBS is leveraged in the production of other artifacts you might find in a PMO repository (like the plans for risk management, HR, communications, schedule and costs)

Chapter 11 covers ways to use the WBS to help manage multicultural and virtual projects. This was my situation and helped convince me that my plan to use the WBS as a key program management tool would be successful

## Highlights

The “Top 20 Benefits of using the WBS” really helps cement how the WBS fits into an overall management scheme. Most are good benefits but some seem in contradiction with each other. Using a WBS to avoid uncontrolled changes (point 2) is great if the requirements of work items are known a-priori but has little leverage if some work items are unable to be adequately defined up front and their later definition results in requirements that have significant schedule impact. However, the ability to “box in” and constrain the unknowns via the WBS helps to define this risk.

In projects where budgets are required (in my case as part of the sales pitch to win a contract) but before adequate investment in analysis of R&D efforts has been done there will be project work where the best the WBS can do is highlight deliverables that are risky. I tried to breakdown these areas with more detail early so the risks could be contained but the WBS does not address schedule so time and costs are not helped by the WBS (as might be implied by point 9 where its stated that WBS can make it easier to “identify the budget” and “estimate the duration of each component”, which seems in slight contradiction to the chapter 1 definition of WBS as a scope definition not task or activity list). However, overall I found most of the listed benefits to be accurate and helpful.

This presentation is the first I’ve seen that formalizes WBS components into Discrete and “Level of Effort” and this treatment makes a huge difference by adding to the WBS relevance as a tool (Chapter 5). Level of Effort activities (mostly project management activities being treated in the WBS like deliverables) are not readily measured end results but are ongoing activities that must exist and are key to managing a project (schedule management, HR management, stakeholder management, etc). Too often, time spent in these management activities is hard to account for in project cost accounting but by clearly showing these efforts alongside deliverables (based on the WBS) then everyone on the project including the PMs have a logical WBS item to charge their time against.

## Highlights: What I liked!

The book “gets into it” right away. The first 5 chapters (72 pages) goes quickly and addresses theory and practice well. At this point the reader has knowledge to create a WBS and know why one will help them in their project. As a refresher its efficient. The latter chapters discuss integration of WBS into overall project management, which is also important, but for the experienced PM these are really two different thought processes so I appreciated the directness.

Chapter 8 discusses how detailed requirements and other aspects of the formal Scope Statement work with the WBS. This is helpful but I find that the canonical sections of a formal scope statement need to be viewed more as a guide than a rule that can be customized based on the size and duration of a project. A good WBS

communicates what must be delivered and for some teams this goes a long way to realizing a successful result. Small teams, experienced team members, subject matter experts, short timelines all are factors that cause the project manager to adapt the formal techniques to what is appropriate for the project.

In my case the development of new technology followed more formal SDLC processes where detailed status is needed to nip problems early, but the delivery activities associated with logistics and construction were adequately specified by detailed WBS and less detailed progress reports. This is more likely to happen when the deliverables have easily measured acceptance criteria (like for physical space design, IT infrastructure, power and UPS, and fiber communication networks) and especially when subcontracted to experienced providers that don't need to be told the details of how to do their job.

### **Who might benefit from the Book?**

The WBS is an appropriate tool for many project types especially those with multiple deliverables and for project teams comprised of many functional specialties (sales, service, production, manufacturing, etc). Project managers assigned to all but the smallest projects would benefit by knowing the WBS basics and applying them to their work. Anyone organizing an event, team, logistics or development effort can use these techniques to help organize their efforts even if their job title doesn't include the term 'project manager'.

### **Conclusion**

The WBS is quite beneficial for communications and management of all functional groups related to a project. As a leader of the development of a new product, service or result its important during the execution and delivery to communicate to the stakeholders of the project. The WBS with status indicators is an excellent baseline for forming communiques. In my case I needed to develop product and broadcast infrastructure with the engineering teams and then deliver this to a video production broadcast team. I also had to show the paying client that we would deliver all that we promised and educate our sales team to be able to speak to our solution when it launched. I found the WBS approach, clarified and explained effectively by Liliana Buchtik very helpful as a basis for discussing deliverables and how they were used, without details of tasks and project phases that were only of interest to those implementing, not those planning to use the final result

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For more about this book, go to:  
<http://marketplace.pmi.org/Pages/ProductDetail.aspx?GMProduct=00101481101>

*Editor's note: This book review was the result of cooperation between the publisher, PM World and the Dallas Chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI Dallas Chapter – [www.pmidallas.org](http://www.pmidallas.org)). Publishers provide the books to PM World; books are delivered to the PMI Dallas Chapter, where they are offered free to PMI members to review; book reviews are published in the PM World Journal and PM World Library. Reviewers can keep the books and claim PDUs for PMP recertification. PMI Dallas Chapter members are generally mid-career professionals, the audience for most project management books. If you are an author or publisher of a project management-related book, and would like the book reviewed through this program, please contact [editor@peworldjournal.net](mailto:editor@peworldjournal.net).*

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## About the Reviewer



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**Lance Van Nostrand** is the CTO of Immersive Media Company and leads projects, research and operations in a high tech environment of a small company. Prior work includes system engineering work across multiple facilities for Carestream Health and also the Kodak Research labs. He has experienced project and portfolio management activities in both small and large companies and understands the striking differences in the challenges that must be overcome to be successful.

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