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Increasing project management involvement in
pre-execution phases of projects
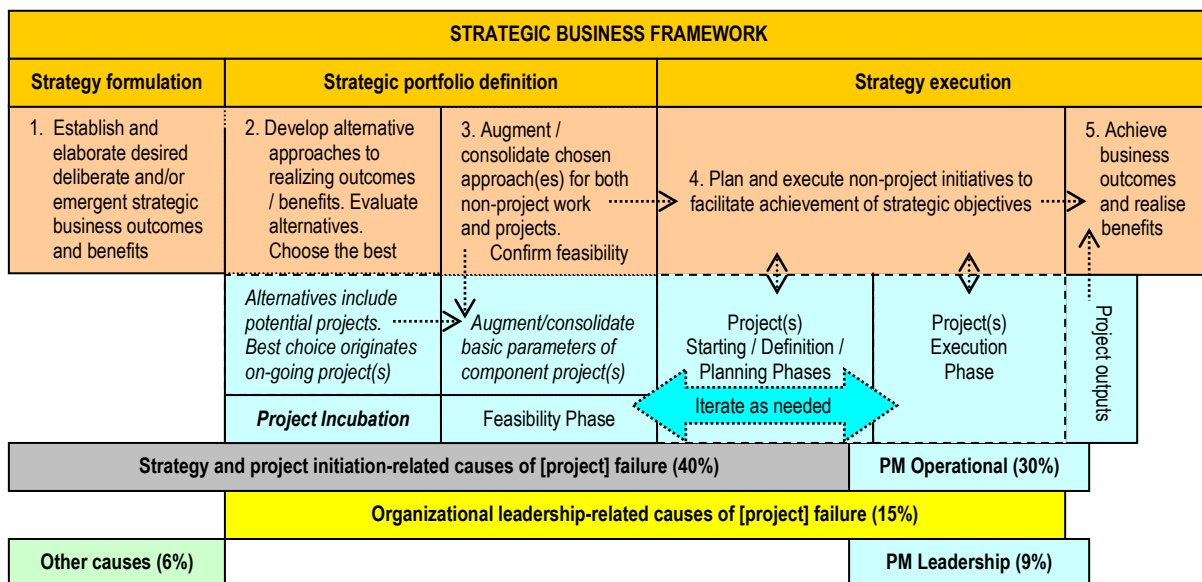Featured Paper   by Alan Stretton

Increasing project management involvement in pre-execution phases of projects?

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

In the last issue of this journal (Stretton 2018a) I discussed detailed causes of project failure from an earlier publication (Stretton 2015a) and related these to an organizational strategic business framework developed in Stretton 2017l. This framework included both project and non-project components, as shown in Figure 1, together with summaries of causes of failure broadly related to this framework.

STRATEGIC BUSINESS FRAMEWORK				
Strategy formulation	**Strategic portfolio definition**		**Strategy execution**	
1. Establish and elaborate desired deliberate and/or emergent strategic business outcomes and benefits	2. Develop alternative approaches to realizing outcomes / benefits. Evaluate alternatives. Choose the best	3. Augment / consolidate chosen approach(es) for both non-project work and projects. Confirm feasibility	4. Plan and execute non-project initiatives to facilitate achievement of strategic objectives	5. Achieve business outcomes and realise benefits
	Alternatives include potential projects. Best choice originates on-going project(s)	*Augment/consolidate basic parameters of component project(s)*	Project(s) Starting / Definition / Planning Phases	Project(s) Execution Phase	Project outputs
	Project Incubation	Feasibility Phase	Iterate as needed		
Strategy and project initiation-related causes of [project] failure (40%)				PM Operational (30%)
Organizational leadership-related causes of [project] failure (15%)				
Other causes (6%)				PM Leadership (9%)

Figure 1: Summarised causes of project failure related to a strategic business framework

It was found that one half of the fourteen initiation-related causes of failure were primarily attributable to project managers not being significantly involved in Stage 2 and 3 under the strategic portfolio definition heading, nor in the project starting/ definition/ planning phases. This related strongly with the organizational leadership-related causes of failure, half of which were directly attributable to senior organizational management having little, if any, knowledge of project management, or of its potential to help them achieve organizational strategic objectives.

Elsewhere in that article, I intimated an intention to discuss an approach to getting earlier project management involvement in my next article in this journal.

Accordingly, this article is primarily concerned with what can be done to increase the involvement of project managers in pre-execution phases of the project life-cycle, to help vastly reduce causes of project failures in these areas.

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We start by looking at processes involved with the origination of projects and the project life-cycle, representing them in the context of being progressive elaborations of project parameters established in the project incubation stage

REPRESENTING THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT PHASES AS PROGRESSIVE ELABORATIONS OF BASIC PROJECT PARAMETERS

In Stretton 2017l in this journal. I noted the observation in the PMBOK Guide that there is no single best way to define an ideal project life-cycle, and discussed a representation to include projects with high initial uncertainties, as well as low ones. This followed an iterative approach proposed by Shenhar & Dvir 2007, and is represented by the double arrowed "Iterate as needed" in Figure 1 above.

Another way of looking at the project life-cycle which I have found useful is the progressive elaboration representation. Progressive elaboration is often referred to in the project management literature as a key element of project management. In Figure 2 I have depicted a succession of progressive elaborations which are approximately related to the project life-cycle phases shown in Figure 1.
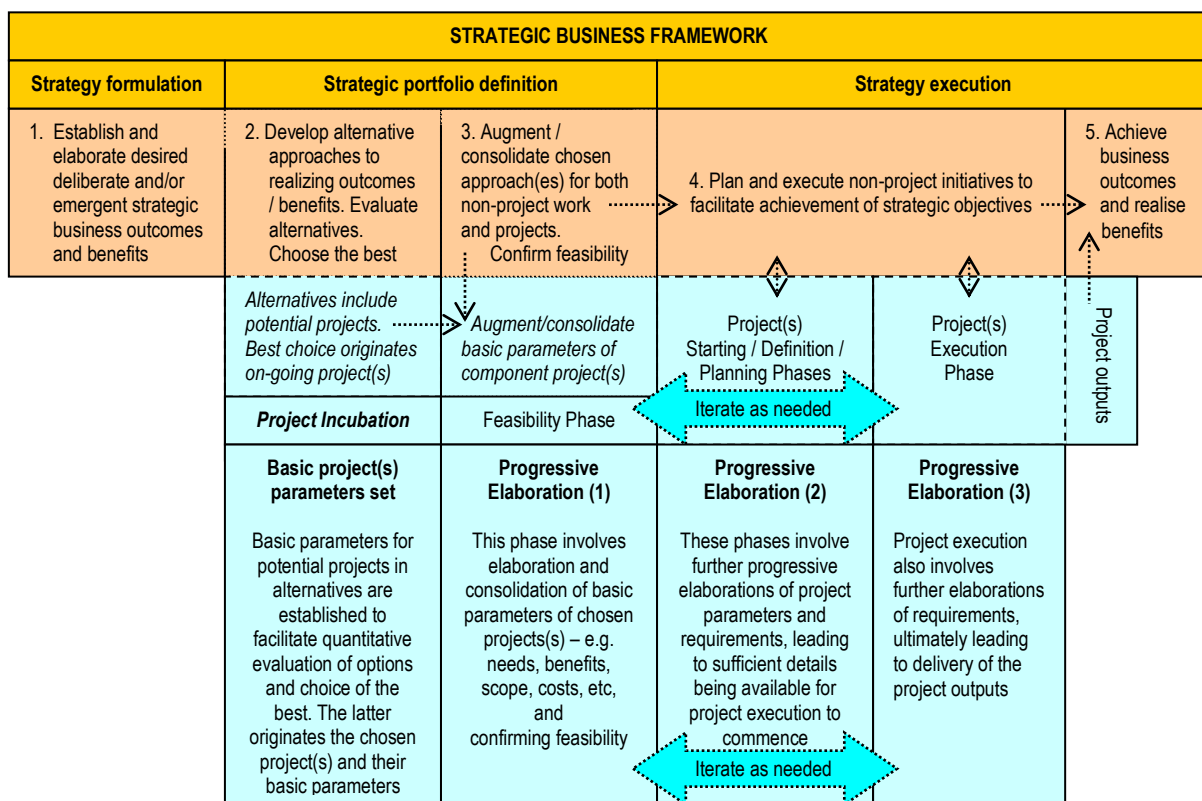
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	Alternatives include potential projects. Best choice originates on-going project(s)	*Augment/consolidate basic parameters of component project(s)*	Project(s) Starting / Definition / Planning Phases	Project(s) Execution Phase	Project outputs
	Project Incubation	Feasibility Phase	Iterate as needed		
	Basic project(s) parameters set	**Progressive Elaboration (1)**	**Progressive Elaboration (2)**	**Progressive Elaboration (3)**	
	Basic parameters for potential projects in alternatives are established to facilitate quantitative evaluation of options and choice of the best. The latter originates the chosen project(s) and their basic parameters	This phase involves elaboration and consolidation of basic parameters of chosen projects(s) – e.g. needs, benefits, scope, costs, etc, and confirming feasibility	These phases involve further progressive elaborations of project parameters and requirements, leading to sufficient details being available for project execution to commence	Project execution also involves further elaborations of requirements, ultimately leading to delivery of the project outputs	
			Iterate as needed		

Figure 2: A progressive elaboration sequence in relation to phases of the project life-cycle

The most significant aspect of the above is that the initial parameters of the project(s) are essentially established during the second stage of the strategic planning process, in which alternative approaches to realizing strategic outcomes / benefits are developed,

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evaluated, and the best option chosen. This is because these alternative approaches invariably involve projects.

Evaluating the alternatives will necessarily include making order-of-magnitude estimates of costs, timing, scope, and similar for the project(s) within these alternatives. When the best alternative is chosen, the basic parameters of the component project(s) of this alternative will already have been established by these order-of-magnitude estimates. From that point onwards, all remaining activities in the project life-cycle will essentially involve progressive elaborations of these basic parameters.

So, these original order-of-magnitude estimates had better be good, or the desired strategic outcomes and benefits are unlikely to be achieved. Who is better qualified than a project manager who is experienced and competent in this area to help ensure that these initial estimates are sound?

Further, the progressive elaboration of these basic project parameters is no task for the amateur, and project management should be involved from the outset.

However, the real-world situation appears that, all too often, such involvement by project management is not sought, or even thought of, by senior management in production-based organizations.

How might this be overcome? Well, senior management can be expected to be most interested in people with demonstrated skills in strategic management. This suggests that at least some project managers would do well to acquire such competencies, if they are to have a chance of contributing at the above levels. However, in the above circumstances, they would probably be well advised to present themselves first as strategic management people, rather than as project people. Let us look a bit more closely at such possibilities.

PROJECT MANAGERS ACQUIRING STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT SKILLS?

The situation in most project-based organizations

As I noted in Stretton 2018a, in the project-based organizations in which I spent much of my working life, all the strategic planning and implementation was undertaken by past or present project managers, because they were all we had. At a personal level I was heavily involved in strategic planning for the parent Lend Lease Corporation for some seven years, and with its subsidiary Civil & Civic for over fifteen years. Sure, I had to acquire quite a few new skills, but isn't that what a manager is constantly doing anyway?

Project managers acquiring additional skills: The Talent Triangle

In an article by Naughton 2013 in this journal, he commented very favourably on an opening address to the 2012 Global Congress by Mark Langley, President and CEO of the Project Management Institute. Naughton reported that Langley outlined and

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described the three major skill sets that tomorrow's project leader will need to possess – namely Technical project management skills, Leadership skills, and Strategic and business management skills, which he called the Talent Triangle.
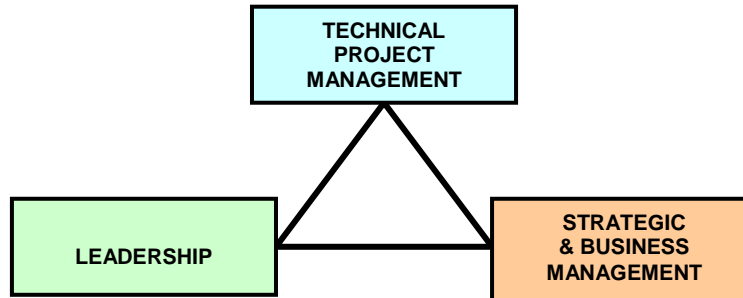
Figure 3: The Langley / Naughton Talent Triangle – adapted from Naughton 2013

Additional strategic management skills are obviously directly relevant for potentially increasing project management involvement in organizational strategic planning processes. Additional business management skills are probably no less relevant, as they go together with strategic management.

I propose to discuss the Talent Triangle in more detail in a later issue of this journal, where I will be specifically concerned with extending the above into the more general issue of increasing project management involvement in senior management activities at large in production-based organizations.

Members of the project team having the requisite additional skills

Butler 2008 proposed a Strategic Execution Framework which has some similarities with mine as depicted in Figure 1 above, but was much more specifically about the project components, and project teams undertaking this work. She said,

> It [the Strategic Execution Framework] relies on project teams with a range of competencies that go beyond traditional project management, including business strategy, portfolio management, investment analysis, portfolio risk management, business process reengineering and organisational design.

So, Butler makes quite a clear exposition of the additional competencies project teams will need to have if they are to contribute, and be seen to contribute, to project initiation processes, including competencies in business strategy. Note that she discusses competencies of project teams, rather than of individual project managers.

However!

Whilst the acquisition of strategic management skills might help a few project managers get involved in strategic portfolio definition, it does not help a great deal in overcoming ignorance by senior management about project management and its potential to help them in achieving strategic objectives.

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I go on to discuss an approach of progressively persuading/ educating senior management to increase project management involvement in pre-execution phases of projects, working back from the project execution phase towards initiation of projects.

POTENTIAL FOR INCREASING PROJECT MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT IN PRE-EXECUTION PHASES OF PROJECTS

A progressive persuasion / education approach to senior general management

In Stretton 2015e (which concluded a series on project successes and failures) I summarised suggested approaches for getting project management more fully involved in pre-execution phases of projects, as had been discussed in the preceding two articles of that series.

These involved a progressive persuading / educating approach, along the lines indicated in Figure 4 below, under the headings "Increased PM [project management] involvement (0) – (3)" – broadly under their corresponding projects phases and strategic planning and implementation stages.

These are largely self-explanatory. Essentially this approach proposes progressive steps in persuading general management (GM) to increase involvement by project managers in pre-execution phases. It starts at the project definition phase, by advocating increased involvement in checking its adequacy, and hopefully then in developing it. If successful, this would logically lead to increased involvement in earlier phases, ultimately leading to involvement from at, or near, the outset.
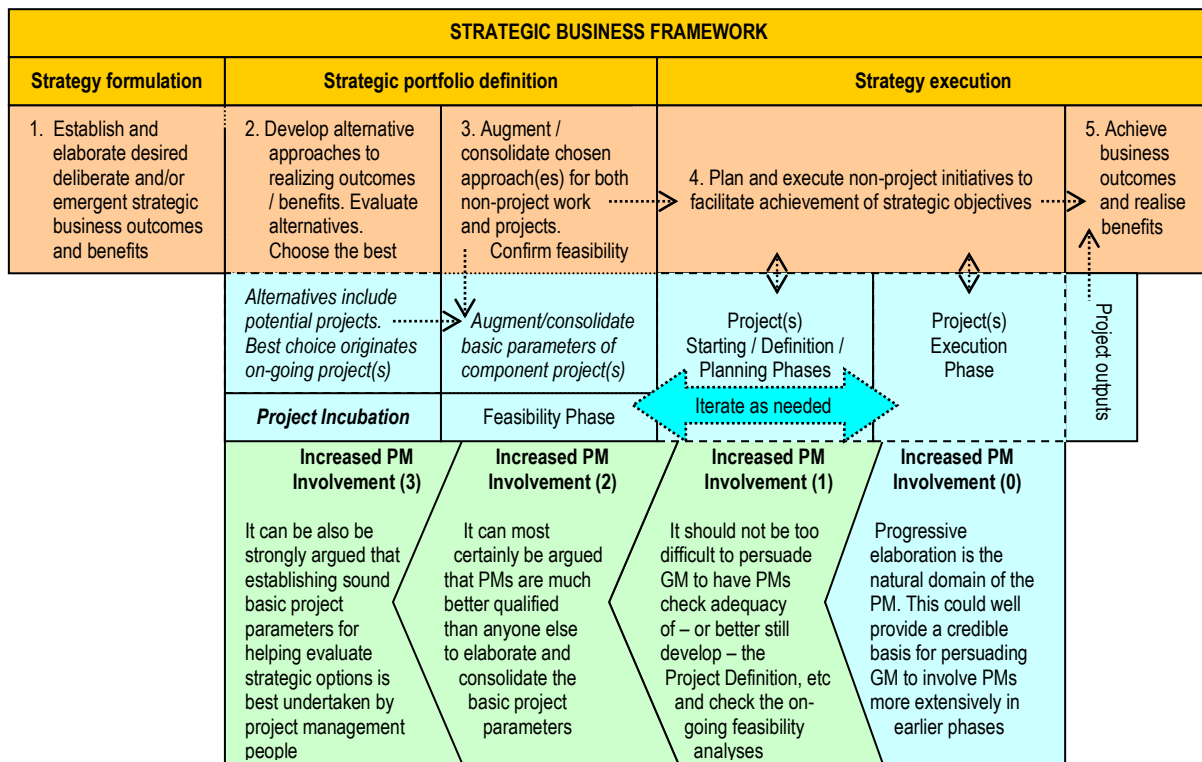

Figure 4: Potential for progressively increasing PM involvement in pre-execution phases

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Obstacles to implementing a progressive persuasion/ education approach

In Stretton 2018a I noted that, for a long time, many writers have been advocating increased involvement by project managers in pre-execution phases of projects. Dalcher 2016 put it this way.

> Viewing projects through a delivery lens decreases the wider impacts and potential influence of projects, ….. Delivery reduces project management to a lower common denominator focused on implementation of pre-defined results. Crucially, it ignores the potential influence of project managers and leaders in shaping, advocating, negotiating, motivating and enhancing potential solutions. It is also worth pointing out that an execution perspective excludes an interest in the longer term, thereby discounting the need to consider benefits, and longer term impacts.

Unfortunately, there are also many project managers, and project management bodies, who do not see this as a priority, and remain focused on project execution. This strongly hampers efforts of advocates for increased early involvement, as I have previously pointed out, most recently, and in some detail in Stretton 2016g.

This situation tends to be reinforced by the contents of many project management standards, particularly the PMBOK Guide (PMI 2013), which basically covers only the execution phase of the project life cycle, with virtually nothing on pre-execution phases. There are two down-sides to this situation.

- The absence of materials on pre-execution phases in the PMBOK Guide tends to reinforce perceptions by general management that project management is only concerned with the execution phase. This further reduces the likelihood that general managers will involve project managers in earlier initiation-related project phases.

- The PMBOK Guide does not offer any substantive guidance to help project managers who are managing, or are otherwise involved in, pre-execution phases. My own observation from the world of practice is that somewhat different skills from execution-related skills are required to be effective in earlier phases, and that these should be covered in some way.

Other PM standards (i.e. bodies of knowledge of project management, competency standards etc) have varying, but generally quite limited, materials on pre-execution phases. It should be noted that we have some guidance on the latter from the broader project management literature, but these materials have rarely found their way into project management standards.

One of the crunch points relating to the above is that, if we leave project initiation to people other than project management, and if it is done poorly (as so often happens), we still find that project management tends to be blamed for failures. To put it mildly, this is bad for the over-all image of project management.

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In these circumstances, there appears to be a very strong case for having much greater participation by project management in project initiation phases, and guidelines in standards to help promote effective performance in this domain.

However, others have made the broader case more eloquently, so I conclude this section with a quotation from Thiry 2011, as follows.

> Project management is becoming a key factor in the most progressive organizations in the new knowledge economy; it is for us to decide if project managers will be the ones leading the charge or the ones walking behind to pick whatever spoils have been left by the leaders. We need not only individuals speaking in isolation, but a real community of people with a holistic vision of project management and project-based organizations to take the lead and to speak up; …..

Currently, we appear to be a long way away from being a community of people with a holistic vision of project management. My own introduction to project management practice over half a century ago was that we were very much leaders, because we actively helped organizations address, and achieve, their strategic objectives.

Subsequently, particularly when I became PMI's Director of Standards, I struggled with the execution-only perspective, and of course still do. I have written about this dichotomy often enough, as have many of us, but evidently to little avail. This still seems to me to be "the elephant in the room" of the project management avocation.

CONCLUDING

Responsibilities for managing the strategic non-project work, and ensuring its integration with the project components

This article has been primarily concerned with possible ways and means of increasing project management involvement in pre-execution phases of projects, and thence potentially into the project-related components of strategic portfolio definition.

However, the strategic planning and execution stages also involve non-project work, which relates in various ways with the project components, and in some cases can be more substantial than the latter. So, even if we succeed in getting project managers involved early in project initiation activities, there is still the question about who manages the non-project work, and who ensures that the latter integrates with the project components of the strategic business framework.
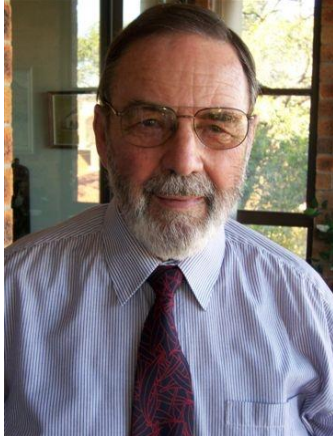
In a later issue of this journal I will be discussing approaches to answering this question.

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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 180 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.