

Project Business Management^{1,2}

Turning Around a Portfolio with Customer-Facing Projects

Oliver F. Lehmann

“There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.”
Colin Powell

Summary

Project portfolio management for corporations that do customer projects to generate revenues has its specific challenges. Projects in crisis can impact the entire portfolio and jeopardize the existence of the company. The magic triangle on contractor-side is made of customer-happiness, profitability and liquidity, and on first glance, they seem to contradict each other.

However, the customer who is procuring the project also has a magic triangle, which mirrors that of the contractor and gives the opportunity to ensure concurrence of customer happiness, profitability, and liquidity.

A Portfolio of Customer Projects in Need of a Turnaround

ArmyAnt, Inc.³ is a company that performs projects for a major number of customers integrating hardware and software to complex working systems. Companies decide to buy and use their services due to ArmyAnt’s great experience from past projects, and also due to a thick folder with letters of reference and of gratitude from customers of previous projects.

¹This is the 13th in a series of articles by Oliver F. Lehmann, author of the book *“Project Business Management”* (ISBN 978-1138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis in 06-2018. See full author profile at the end of this article. A list of the other articles in PM World Journal can be found at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann>.

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³ All names changed.

ArmyAnt has many assets such as skilled people, know-how, licenses and equipment that customers love to tap into and use them as project resources. ArmyAnt in turn loves to tap into customers' financial assets and turn them into revenue—and finally into profit. ArmyAnt was just a typical company bringing money home by performing projects for customers in return for payment under contract.

As any company that makes its living from being a contractor for one or more customers, ArmyAnt worked inside a magic triangle of objectives, that included the happy customer, protection of the own liquidity, and profitability. Liquidity protects the presence of the organization, the happy customer as an incumbent and a reference allows it to be successful in the future, and profitability provides the assets today that can be turned into resources to realize this future. The magic triangle is shown in Figure 1.

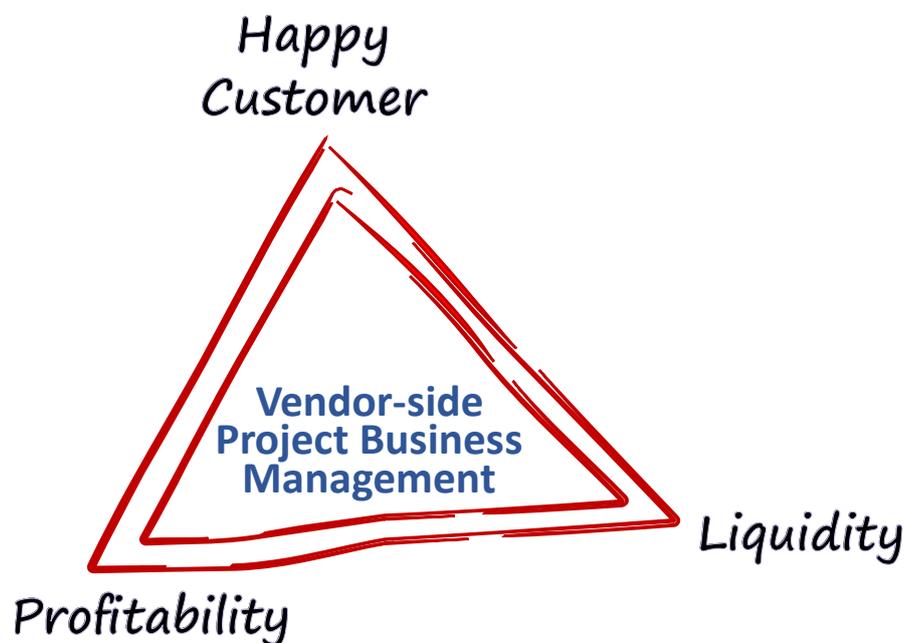


Figure 1: Profitability of customer-facing projects is one corner of the "Magic triangle" of Project business management for vendors

However, in the recent past, this profit topic turned out to become more and more of a problem, and resolving it for a portfolio of complex projects proved to be difficult.

ArmyAnt's Beginnings

ArmyAnt had started almost two decades ago as a one-man-one-customer provider. Archibald Ant, the founder of the organization, began managing customer projects as a self-employed service provider for his former employer, after his boss had laid him off along with many others. While his former employer had made him redundant, the company still wanted to use his competencies and experience.

The solution was to assign work to him as a contractor instead of hiring him as an employee. The costs he incurred for the organization moved from the payroll to the procurement budget, a development that was welcomed by shareholders. Archibald found that somewhat strange, because as a contractor he was actually more expensive. So he started his little business, which soon proved to be highly profitable for him.

Despite the profit, Archibald soon noticed the risk of having only one customer: The company could end business with him at any time. Such a decision would leave him without income from one day to the next. His income was fully dependent on his single client, and when they had negotiations about fees and contractual conditions of business, he learned that the company was very aware of this dependency.

Years of Growth

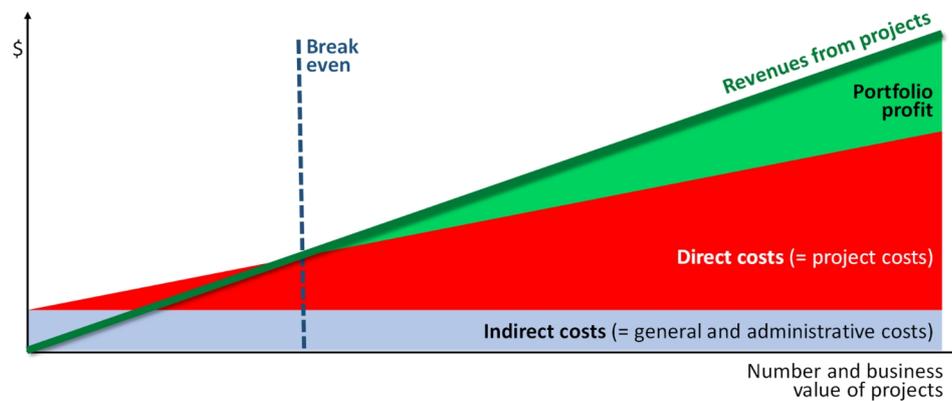
His profitable little business left some time and money, which he did not need in order to cope with the daily needs. He used it to navigate his little business onto an expansion course. He incorporated a small company, ArmyAnt, to replace his simple freelancer existence, won new customers, and hired staff to serve them. His newly recruited personnel included some of his old, well-known colleagues, who had been made redundant with him, but also people he had not known before. The latter posed some new uncertainties to Archibald, as he had no familiarity with them. The same was true for new customers.

The growing number of projects had a negative effect for his business: The average margin generated by each of the now 35 projects in the portfolio declined. With more projects done concurrently, the effect of fading project margins got even stronger. This seemed to contradict normal business understanding, but the observation was clear.

A common expectation is that doing more projects make the company more profitable: The cumulated margins (payments from customers minus direct costs for each of the projects) increase with a growing number of projects. Deduct the indirect costs of the entire organization, which are expected to be fixed and not grow with the number of projects, and the larger portfolio should be more lucrative, an effect often referred to as “scaling factors”, as seen in the top diagram of Figure 2.

For Archibald instead, at some points in time, the scaling factors turned around and became negative. The bottom diagram in Figure 2 shows the observations done by Archibald, that with a high load of project work, both direct and indirect costs went up, and the additional costs increased more than the additional profit.

Expectation: A linear relationship between direct and indirect costs, revenues and profit



Observation: A non-linear relationship that leads to negative scaling factors when the portfolio is under high load

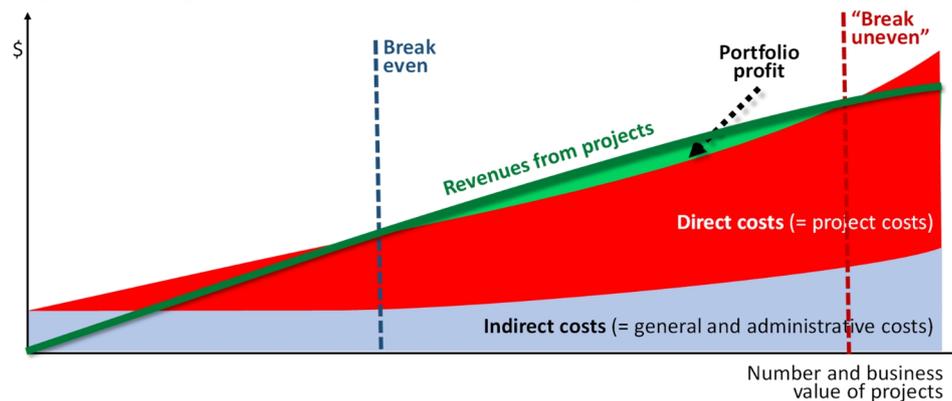


Figure 2: The simple marginal costing graphic that describes how direct and indirect costs are linked with revenues and profit in a linear fashion (top) may not work in project portfolios, where high workloads can damage profitability as much as low ones.

He found that a portfolio of customer projects has a "break even" point, when the number of projects and their consolidated margins cover the general and administrative costs of the company. But he found that there is also a "break uneven" point, when the workload on people and physical resources increases to a burden beyond what is bearable for them. Between these two points is the "sweet spot" in which the portfolio has the chance to be profitable.

What caused the enormous increase in project costs when the workload grew beyond a healthy degree? He found several factors that made the projects and also the general costs to operate the organization more expensive

- Hiring new staff for productive as well as for non-productive back-office work adds costs immediately, but is slower to add to productivity. In a project environment driven by the uniqueness of many tasks, it takes more time and effort to train people. Much of that training is done by existing staff, impacting their productivity.

- For many tasks, newly hired persons needed to be accepted by the customer before he or she can begin doing the work. Some were soon found to be the wrong choice and needed to be replaced again.
- Firing staff when workload is low is difficult. Changes in workload come abruptly when working in projects, and they are often hard to predict. Team members who are idle at a certain moment may be urgently needed in another one. Another negative aspect of firing is the depressing impact on general team morale, with a high team spirit being one of the most valuable assets in a contractor organization.
- Competition for resources among the portfolio projects also took its toll. This can concern funding, people, equipment, licenses and more. The key resource here is probably management attention: A project that has management attention is still not guaranteed to have the other resources such as money, equipment, and people; but when management attention is missing, all the other resources will be lacking as well. Management attention was the scarcest of all resources at ArmyAnt, and the time and energy dedicated to one project was missing for another one.

Over all the years of success and growth, Archibald Ant had focused on customers, own employees, technical capabilities and so on. He never considered management attention a resource, but now he found that it was a key resource for success and finally the scarcest resource in his organization. He often boasted about the “slim organization” with “low management overhead”, but with the insufficiently organized management function, ArmyAnt became too often unable to turn workload into profit.

There is a common opinion that a difference exists between management and leadership: The core task of management, following this opinion, is to create predictability and order, leadership is about delivering change. Archibald learned the hard way that leadership has another task that is generally overlooked: Making the organization profitable. Archibald had never perceived himself as a leader, he instead took comfort in describing himself as a technical expert. But for a service provider in the field of project business for paying customers, this was not sufficient. Such a company needs leadership.

The core problem was a lack of attention to the great number of concurrent projects that his company performed meanwhile. He was not able to dedicate enough attention to each of them. In addition, the people he had hired to manage the projects were more or less well-educated in project management and in technical matters, but had no business acumen and no interest in leading profit centers. They did not consider it their problem if their projects were not sufficiently profitable.

He was not the only person who had difficulties to adjust behaviors to the changing needs of the company. One of his first employees had been Brenda Bee, a long-standing friend and colleague since their joint time as students at the university. Brenda was the company's firefighter. Her specialty was taking care of projects in troubles, and with her technical and social expertise she generally turned them around. With the growing number of customer

projects in the portfolio, the number of troubled projects grew as well, and it grew disproportionately high. Brenda was among his most valuable employees, but she showed signs of exhaustion and even of burnout. Archibald had long planned to allow her time of rest and relaxation, but there was always another project in trouble that needed her attention. Often, she had to look after more than one project at a time.

Brenda was not the only person showing signs of burnout at ArmyAnt. Increasing over hours, absenteeism, and turnover were clear signs that ArmyAnt's staff was massively overworked. Customer projects suffered from the reduced productivity of the company when people's presence and productivity was needed most, another factor adding to the "break uneven" point that ArmyAnt was approaching. It was clear that the way ArmyAnt used its people would not be sustainable.

In its early years, ArmyAnt was a company in which smiling, hugging, and laughing were the most universal and effective languages. Meanwhile, people laughed much less, and overwork and conflicts made hugs and smiles appear much more rarely, and in many occasions when they occurred, it was unclear if they were meant honestly.

Overtaxed workforce was a kind of problem that Archibald had to learn to understand and address. He was educated in dealing with tangible issues, and the dynamics of staff exhaustion were outside his home area of competence. As a freelancer, he was used to tackle problems by working harder. At other times, when workload was less, he would use that to recover and prepare for weeks of high stress that were definitively to come soon. At ArmyAnt, employees slipped from one high-workload moment directly into the next, often had to multitask among several projects, and the only way to find time to recover was to "skive off".

At the end of the year, Archibald identified another problem: ArmyAnt had to lay out money for its customer projects, and in the past, he did not have problems to negotiate credits with the bank. The profitability of the company in its young days was strong and the bank was perfectly confident that the credits it was given to finance its projects would be paid back on time. While the profitability of ArmyAnt's projects withered over time, the demand for credits to cover outlays rose. The companies for which ArmyAnt worked got larger over time, and so did their projects. The payment terms of these larger companies were less favourable for contractors than those of the smaller companies in the early years. In his first projects, Archibald had payments agreed upon in 30 days or less; sometimes, even in advance. Now however, to win large customers, Archibald had to accept payments in 3 to 6 months after acceptance of invoices. Many invoices were not immediately accepted by customers, delaying payments even more. This ate massively into ArmyAnt's liquidity needed to pay employees, invoices, and tax.

Financial bottlenecks

To make things worse, the need for short-term credits was at times low, but almost exploded in an unforeseen pattern in other moments—moments when immediately necessary expenditures coincided with delayed payments from customers. A further drawback was that he had not built corporate riches in form of hard assets. ArmyAnt's offices were rented, cars were leased, and its equipment was not of enough value to be used as a guarantee for a bank loan. Money earned was invested in people, not in tangible things. This made credits expensive, and the conditions under which they were given to the company were not favourable, either.

The business year was about to end, but in addition to the sticky profitability situation, liquidity had become the biggest problem. While his friends and their families prepared for Christmas, Archibald did deep analysis of the root causes for his company's problems. He was aware that his lack of attention to individual projects was one of them, poor education of project managers in commercial matters a second, but what else had happened? How could it be that at times the company's profitability had been eaten up so much and liquid money insufficient to cover running costs—until customer payments would come in to cover them? ArmyAnt could go insolvent from one day to the next if these payments came in late.

Digging deeper, he soon found out that customer happiness was the third root cause. Project managers often had to make decisions to avoid or mitigate the risk of frustrated customers. When they were successful, these additional costs affected commercial success. When they failed, delayed and reduced payments from customers had essentially the same impact.

Archibald identified another root cause of crises: Decisions made under time pressure. The DIKA cycle separates subjective from objective from subjective decision aspects, as shown in Figure 3.

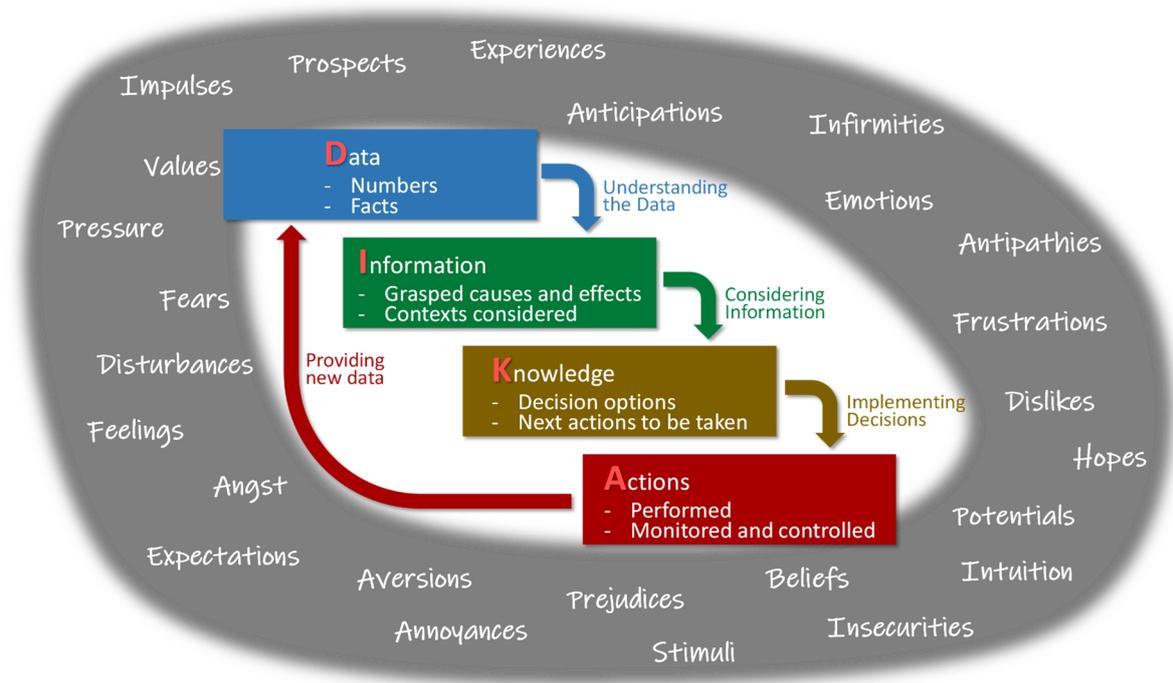


Figure 3: The DIKA cycle separates subjective from objective decision criteria.

The DIKA process attempts to base actions on data, analysis and considerations, more than on subjective criteria.⁴ The latter may still be decision-relevant, but ideally only in the light of the former—in order to prevent poor decisions taken on a whim.

There are reasons to circumvent the DIKA process, when emergency situations do not allow the time to analyse the situation and wisely select the appropriate action. Human life or health may be in danger. There may be a threat to the environment. Your boss may be taken into jail, or there might be another urgent issue that requires a quick response. Such cases exist, but – depending on the project and the industry – should be rather seldom.

Non-emergency decisions made under time pressure do often also not go through DIKA analysis of the various options and impacts that would prevent foreseeable poor decisions. Decisions under time pressure are made according to subjective emotions and feelings, rather than to knowledge based on data that has been understood. Another problem is that decisions made early are much less costly, and the higher number of opportunities at that point in time make it more likely that they are effective. Decisions made late suffer from a loss of choices and from increased costs to implement them.

⁴ The model is based on the DIKW “Wisdom pyramid” (Rowley, 2007), replacing the somewhat esoteric step “wisdom” with action and closing the cycle, as action creates new data through monitoring and controlling.

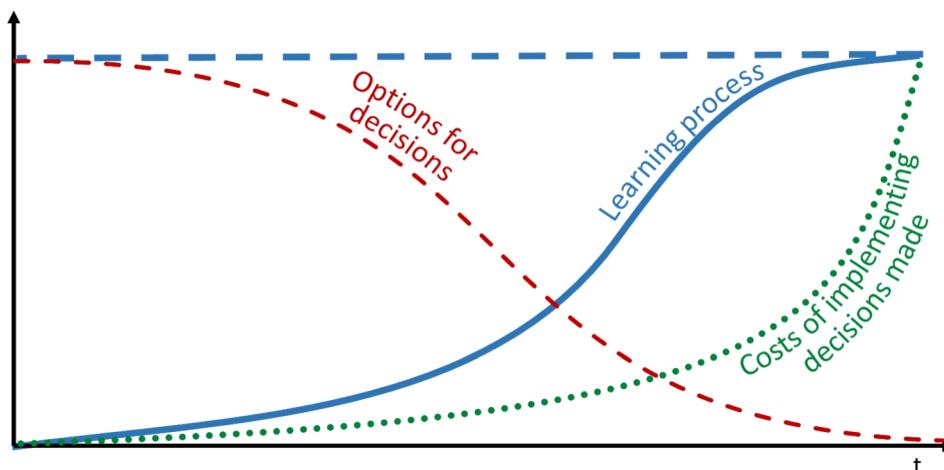


Figure 4: Decisions made late come with increased costs and a loss of options, that would have been available if the decision would have been made earlier.

Figure 4 shows that late decisions are more costly. This is comparable with gas prices in cities: They are commonly more expensive in the morning when people have to rush to work and do not have the time to digress from the fastest way to look for cheaper offers. In the evening, on the way home, time pressure is much lower, and so are gas prices. The example also shows that the later someone leaves home, the less choices that person has which way to take to get to work.

The solution involving less costly decisions with more options to choose from is meant to ensure that the learning curve is passed as early as possible. Like this, the need for decisions is visible when many options are at hand and costs associated with them are still low. Figure 5 describes this basic project management approach.

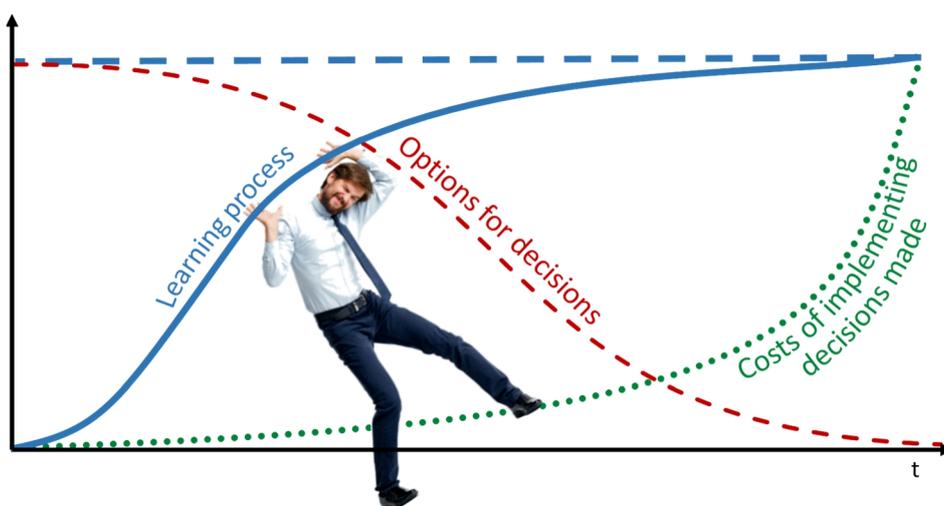


Figure 5: Most project management methods are meant to accelerate learning processes and allow for decisions made early.

Methods to accelerate the learning curve are known as Project charter, Project scope statement, WBS, Network diagramming, proactive risk management, proactive quality

management and many more. In essence, most project management methods, tools, and techniques⁵ have this goal: Making knowledge available early in the project, when many options are at hand at their costs are still much lower.

Business success in a project portfolio obviously needs project management qualification as much as it needs business management competency.

Resolving problems in the last minute often had another detrimental effect for ArmyAnt's projects:

Archibald found more than one case in which a project in troubles dragged other projects into disturbances. Projects that had difficulties to meet deadlines often received additional people and resources to increase speed, a technique sometimes referred to as "crashing"⁶. These resources had to be taken away from other projects that may have been on schedule so far. The temporary loss of people, equipment, and other resources led to delays for them too, resulting in the need to crash them later as well. A project portfolio that needs to crash one project after the other has an overall reduced efficiency, for a multitude of reasons:

- Team members added late to a project have to be assigned to tasks that match their interests, competencies, and skills. Such organization takes time.
- The team members must be guided to understand what their new job is and how to collaborate with the people already there.
- The "old" team members will have to provide that guidance and will spend non-productive time familiarizing the new team members with the work.
- A small team with a big number of tasks can be utilized very well. With the team growing larger, idle times will generally go up. This happens for example when one team member has to wait for the results of another and no other work can be done to keep the person busy.
- The "Law of Diminishing Returns" says that for a growing number of identical similar resources, each new resource will have less value. At one point, adding further resources will have no additional benefits.

A thirsty person in a desert may be prepared to spend a fortune for a glass of water. The value of a second glass will be less, and at one point in time, the person may reject another glass, because the person is no longer thirsty.

- "Liebig's Law" says that when one bottleneck limiting productivity in a process has been widened, another bottleneck will limit productivity. When more people are

⁵ (PMI, 2017)

⁶ Probably derived from "crash courses", a method used in British language schools to train a person in a foreign language in the shortest time possible.

assigned to a project, the new bottleneck may be bandwidth in the computer network, or tools available for them, or simply space for them to work together.

Preparing for the Turnaround

Archibald soon understood that bringing his company back into the success corridor would necessitate an integrated approach that brought together the financial and commercial aspects of the projects in the portfolio and combined them with increased professionalism in project management matters.

He developed a three-step initiative:

Step 1: Typification

The times of fast growth of ArmyAnt had led to attempts to standardize projects for customers. A project portfolio can be under-standardized, making it hard to manage as a whole, or over-standardized, making it harder for people to manage individual projects. To some degree, ArmyAnt's projects became over-standardized and needed a more situational approach. Classification can help treat projects more situational.

Projects could be classified in three groups:

- **Class 1: Well-running projects** that needed to be protected from being impacted by projects in troubles, but apart from that, required less attention.
- **Class 2: Challenging projects** that were still running well but needed increased attention to prevent them from running into troubles from internal causes or impact from troubled projects.
- **Class 3: Troubled projects** that needed corrective action without jeopardizing the other projects and the entire portfolio.

Step 2: Identification of core problems and solutions

The magic triangle of Profitability, Liquidity, and Customer happiness was located at the heart of the analysis of the Class 2 and Class 3 projects. Causes were identified that led to dissatisfaction in either of the three aspects of customer project success.

In the past, often only one angle had been looked at when project decisions needed to be made, for example "What needs to be done to increase profitability?" or "How can we increase customer happiness?" or "How can we protect our credit line?" The simultaneous appreciation of all three angles of the triangle allowed discovering the underlying dynamics

between the three aspects and seeing how shortcomings in one of them often negatively impacted the other two.

For the development of the solution, a foundational paradigm named “Mission Success First” was implemented. It was developed by NASA in the aftermath of a series of failed missions in the late 20th century. The analyses showed that the troubles in ArmyAnt’s projects were generally linked with problems on customer side.

- Some customers had developed internal projects and outsourced certain work packages that became customer-facing projects for contractors such as ArmyAnt. The contractors in these projects often suffered from poor project management on customer side, which led to delays and cost overruns for the contractors.
- Other projects were launched and completely outsourced by customers in response to their internal problems. Without these problems, the projects would not have been launched at all, or the customers would have done them internally.
- A third group of project was troubled because customers actually abused their contractors. Disinterested in a fair share of obligations, they successfully unloaded the burden of project risks on their contractors, while they kept any benefits for themselves. ArmyAnt identified these projects as bad business and looked at ways to evade these contracts without economical damage.

For projects of the first two groups, a contractor could do more than just meeting contractual obligations. The deep entanglement of the contractor with the customer, which grew tighter and more multi-faceted over time, allowed “Benefit Engineering”: offers of additional support in return for money, relaxation of deadlines and other benefits for the contractor. On top of that, ArmyAnt was often enough in a position to carefully help the customer improve internal processes and resolve their project troubles. “Mission Success First” for the customer finally promised higher profitability, better liquidity, and a happy customer for ArmyAnt.

Step 3: Implementation of the solutions

The implementation of the approach was another challenge: Recommending changes as a contractor can make customers suspicious. The expectation that a contractor is rather a party with own business interests and not a partner in search for a win-win solution can lead to a negative response. One customer who considered contractors generally untrustworthy, began ranting and accused ArmyAnt’s project manager of deception.

It became clear that trust-building measures had to be taken first. These take time and cost money, but carried out successfully, they could finally save money and increase project velocity.

A first action was the implementation of stakeholder forums—meetings with managers and employees from customer side. There, they were allowed to bring up complaints, concerns, and any questions that related to the project and its deliverables. ArmyAnt had prepared three types of responses:

1. Standard responses, when a reaction “off the shelf” seemed sufficient.
2. Connection to experts who could answer questions or discuss concerns satisfactorily. These experts could come from inside the project team, or they were subject matter experts inside the contractor organization.
3. Connection to decision-makers inside the project, when the response to the complaint or concern could possibly include changes to the project or its deliverables.

The format of the stakeholder forum could soon be standardized and simplified without weakening the positive effect of building trust and rapport.

Another action was the implementation of a simple tracking dashboard as an online solution that the customer-side managers could use to assess the status of the project and that gave them simple spreadsheets and diagrams that they could use in communications with their managers. These dashboards highlighted not only achievements, but also challenges and problems. They communicated to the customer where the contractor would need support.

Over time, the perception of all-over transparency and openness became a reason for customers to prefer ArmyAnt in bidding processes, but the intended short-time effect was to build trust that could be used to solicitate joint decisions to the benefit of both parties.

A third approach was to identify opportunities to build trust based on the specific opportunities found on customer side. It was often sufficient to speak with the customer in a particular way. One customer had employees that spoke a strong dialect, and when the contractor brought a person into the team who spoke the same dialect, a lot of ice was broken just in minutes. Awareness of the little opportunities to present oneself as helpful and caring was also effective in building trust.

These measures were successful to various degrees in the individual projects. Where they were fully appreciated by customers, Benefit engineering could be implemented in perfect openness: “Dear customer, we currently have a problem with a deadline (or the price that the customer is paying, or another contractual element). We found that you also have a problem (or are missing an opportunity for better business). Why don’t you allow us to solve your problem and give us the extra time (or money etc.) that this takes.”

The customer is normally not interested in damaging the contractor’s business but in having a great project and a successful all-over operation.

Unfortunately, exceptions to this rule exist, and when a contractor identifies that, retreating from the business in the least damaging manner may be the best decision.

Claim Management

Archibald Ant identified another weak spot in his organization: the established claim manager. There are different interpretations of what a claim manager is doing. In a common understanding, the understanding also used at ArmyAnt, the claim manager analyses reports and other documentation, then talks with staff members to identify constructive changes that could be additionally charged.

Constructive changes are not mutually agreed upon, instead, they just “somehow happen”, when the individuals involved in the project jointly deviate from the valid contract to some degree, like doing overtime hours or adding some extras to deliverables. These actions are then “construed” from hindsight to be de-facto changes, and many of them can be invoiced. That’s what the person did who was employed in the role of claim manager: Making sure that everything that can be billed is actually billed.

The idea to hire a professional claim manager is that the person achieves more in additional income by billing otherwise unnoticed constructive changes than what her employment costs the company. This put pressure on the person at ArmyAnt to justify—and save—her own job by showing herself as unforgiving.

There are indeed moments when such behaviour is valuable, but the unrelenting insistence on billing any little deviation from the contract soon led to deep frustrations on the side of the customer. It also led to undocumented work done by contractor staff to avoid that benevolent actions done for the customer got immediately charged.

Undocumented work and deliveries in customer projects can lead to problems when something fails, and this is precisely what happened at ArmyAnt, adding further amounts to the costs of the claim manager. It was discussed whether the position should be completely given up or the job description be changed to take the burden from the claim manager to act as a one-person profit center inside the portfolio.

The final decision was to change the job description and modify the person’s responsibilities: When constructive changes were not billed to the customer, she should ensure that the customer is aware of the goodwill of the decision, using the position to build more trust and rapport, based on the understanding that this trust is the fundamental basis for a customer-facing project business that is profitable, ensures liquidity, and makes the customer happy.

A Sustainable Long-Term Approach

Archibald meanwhile understood that apart from the price that the contractor would charge to the customer, there was also a magic triangle on buyer side, shown in Figure 6, that mirrored that on seller side (see Figure 1 on page 2). A vendor would be allowed to be more expensive than competitors if the demands from the triangle are better met.

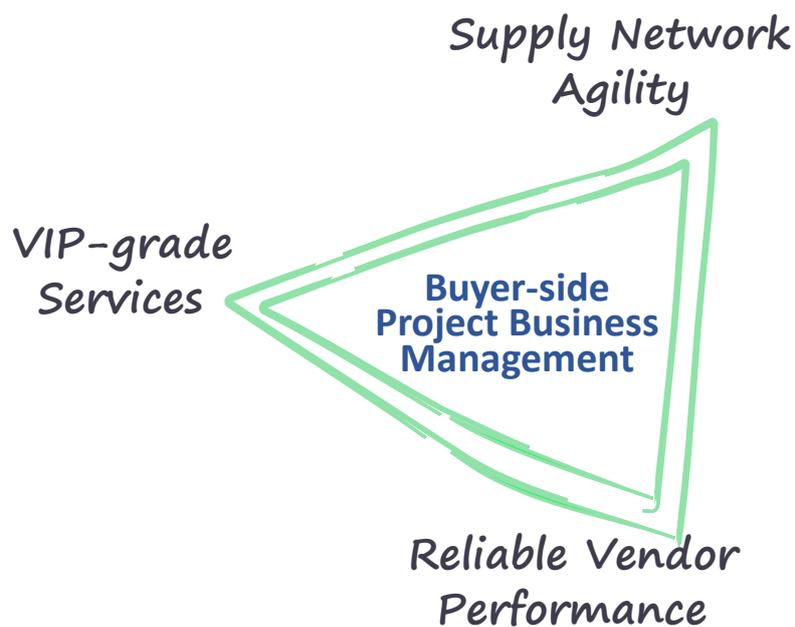


Figure 6: The magic triangle on buyer side

The basic tenet of the new discipline named “Project Business Management”⁷ is that both sides, customer and clients, have one great common interest: “Completing over competing”. They want to do great projects together.

In a short-term approach, the corners of the contractor’s triangle seem to compete with each other. For example, making the customer happy is often considered too costly and damaging for profitability. In a long-term scenario, they are linked in a different way:

1. A not profitable and liquid contractor will not have the resources to satisfy the client.
2. An unhappy customer will not pay in full and in a timely manner.
3. Lack of profitability makes it impossible for the contractor to build resources for moments, when liquidity is strained.

⁷ (Lehmann, 2018)

5. Late payments by a customer may necessitate taking credits by the contractor, and the costs of these credits will impact profitability.

As a contractor, one has to look at all three aspects of customer business at the same time, and it may be recommendable to also implement a moral compass for project managers to follow in form of a Code of Conduct.⁸

If a trustful relationship with the customer has been built, it may be helpful to openly discuss that together, in order to ensure final “Mission Success First” for the project.

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⁸ (PMI, 2006)

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His seminal book "[Project Business Management](#)" has been published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis in June 2018 (ISBN 978-1138197503).