

Applying Earned Benefit Management¹

The Benefits of the Earned Benefit Framework²

Counteracting the Common Causes of “Project” Failure

By Crispin (“Kik”) Piney, PgMP, PfMP

This article was triggered by Alan Stretton’s series of articles in the PM World Journal, and especially his latest one, in November 2018, entitled “Responsibilities for ‘project’ successes/failures?” On reading that article, I realized that the Earned Benefit Framework can – and should – be applied to counteract a number of the highlighted issues.

Introduction: What I Had Overlooked

I have just realized that, although the Earned Benefit Method insists on the importance of starting from the “why” of any endeavour, (i.e., the intended benefit) before focussing on the “how” (i.e., the actions, tools and techniques), I have so far omitted to explain the basic, organizational benefits of applying this method. To date, I have explained the power of the method for providing all of the information required for effective realization of the forecast benefits along with the associated techniques and algorithms. However, if the organization is dysfunctional, the results of the techniques will also be worthless

The real “why” for applying the Earned Benefit Framework is to enhance project value and business success in a predictable and repeatable manner. As will be explained, one definite cause of failures in benefits-related endeavours is the lack of tools and concepts specific to program management, allied, all-too-often, to the lack of the will for greater visibility. In addition, all such endeavours are carried out as if the use of project management concepts and tools will be sufficient for ensuring success. It will be shown that neither these project management concepts

¹ This series is by Crispin “Kik” Piney, author of the book [Earned Benefit Program Management, Aligning, Realizing and Sustaining Strategy](#), published by CRC Press in 2018. Merging treatment of program management, benefits realization management and earned value management, Kik’s book breaks important new ground in the program/project management field. In this series of articles, Kik introduces some earned benefit management concepts in simple and practical terms.

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nor these tools are, in fact, adequate for achieving success in complex programs, and that the Earned Benefit Framework can provide the solution to these problems.

The current article will explain how the application of the Earned Benefit Framework along with the adoption of an Organizational Project Management model can counteract incomplete and unreliable organizational practices that seriously undermine the chances of project success.

Acknowledgement

Alan Stretton has given me permission to quote extensively from his recent article in PM World Journal [Stretton (2018)], and I would like to acknowledge his contribution to raising my awareness of the issues and for trusting me to make good use of his material.

Link to Previous Articles

Earlier articles in this series [Piney 2018b, Piney 2018c, Piney 2018d, Piney 2018e, Piney 2018f, Piney 2018g] explained how to apply the Earned Benefit cost and benefit evaluation algorithms to a representative case study.

The current article changes topic, away from the technical details of method, to concentrate on the organization as a whole.

In order to allow this article to be understood independently of the earlier ones in the series, some reminders are provided below, plus an overview of the case study, prior to addressing the current topic of counteracting common sources of project failure.

Reminder on Benefits Realization Maps

A Benefits Realization Map (BRM) illustrates how to make the benefits happen. The BRM for the case study is shown in Figure 1.

BRMs can be developed in two passes, as follows:

Top-Down Strategy Decomposition

Once the anticipated benefits have been defined by the strategic sponsor, you need to determine all of the steps that are required for delivering this result, as well as their interdependencies, thereby allowing you to identify the necessary component projects (“initiatives”). The links from each logical step to the next are quantified based on their relative importance for contributing to realizing the benefits (the “contribution fraction” for the link).

The Benefits Allotment Routine (BAR) uses the forecast benefit value of the strategic objectives in conjunction with the link contribution fractions to calculate the contribution to the anticipated benefits of each node in the BRM. In particular, the BAR evaluates the contribution to the anticipated benefits of each component project.

Because of the way the BRM is drawn with the strategic outcomes on the right and the component projects on the left, this top-down approach is also characterized as “right-to-left”.

Similarly, the bottom-up approach is also known as “left-to-right”.

Bottom-Up Component Evaluation

Once the full set of parameters that define the model is known (predicted benefits, estimated cost per initiative, and the structure of the benefits map including the links and their contribution fractions), no additional assumptions on the model are required in order to evaluate the cost of each intermediate node in the model. The “Break Even Everywhere Routine” (the BEER) provides the additional link parameters (the “allocation fractions”) required for calculating the corresponding cost of each node, based on the cost of the initiatives and the structure of the map.

The BAR and the BEER

It is important to understand the way in which the model works:

The BAR – by applying the contribution fractions – can be used to evaluate the top-down effect of nodes across the BRM and diffuse values from right to left. Although the BAR algorithm was initially applied to the contributions, it can also be used to diffuse any other program-related values across the model from right to left.

Due to the way in which the BEER was specified, the allocation fractions provide the means for distributing not only costs but also other quantities (such as node Earned Benefit) across the map from the initiatives (on the left in the BRM) towards the strategic outcomes (on the right).

In general, therefore, the strategic effects diffuse from right to left, according to the BAR. Tactical activities affect downstream nodes, from left to right, based on the BEER.

These algorithms are used to evaluate the forecast contribution and allocation of each node based on the forecast benefits and implementation costs. This is known as the “static model”. The addition of ramp-up durations and other lead times illustrated by use of a roadmap can be used to forecast the program’s cash-flow. This is known as the “dynamic model”. Only the static model is used in the current article.

The Case Study for the Current Article

The business objective of the program in this example is to increase profits for an organization in the area of customer service. The premise of the case study is that strategic analysis by senior management has shown that increased customer satisfaction with after-sales support enhances business results and has the potential for delivering additional revenue of €300,000 per annum compared with the current level of business. However, this service will also lead to an increase in operational costs amounting to 25% of the corresponding financial improvement, thereby reducing the net benefit by that amount.

In the previous articles, the steps to achieving the business objective were developed and quantified, all the way back from the required strategic outcome across to identifying the

required projects. The corresponding BRM for this program, including the financial numbers and allocation fractions mentioned above, is shown in Figure 1.

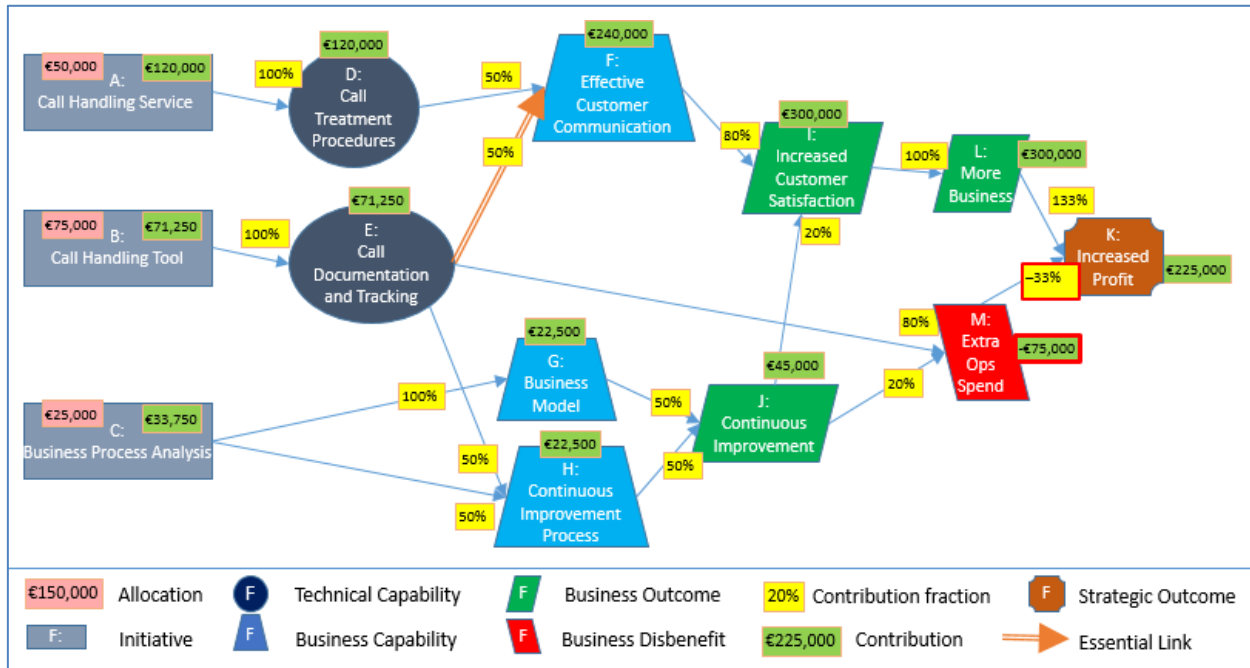


Figure 1: Complete Benefits Map

After these reminders, we are now in a position to move forward and analyze how the Earned Benefit Framework (EBF) can counteract organizational causes of “project” failure.

Scope of this Article

A large number of authors [e.g., Jenner, 2015; Stretton, 2018] have explained that the term “project failure” is widely applied to failings which actually arise from dysfunctional organizational practices that affect, but are in no way the responsibility of, the project management organization. This is similar to blaming it on your car when you run out of petrol although the problem was caused by your having omitted to put enough fuel in the tank for the journey.

To explain how to counteract this situation, the current article will follow the structure of [Stretton, 2018] and explain where and how the Earned Benefit Framework can be applied to specific categories of cause that are identified in the document.

Know Your Enemy

The first set of causes of “failure” are based on Stephen Jenner’s article and are shown in Table 1 of Alan Stretton’s article. Of these eight causes, four can be directly addressed by the Earned Benefit Framework.

(1) Lack of clear link between the project and the organisation’s key strategic priorities

As explained above, the basis of building a BRM is to start by defining the right-hand side. By definition, this entails developing a clear and quantifiable definition of the intended strategic

benefit(s). Any organization that has adopted the EBF as a basis for benefits realization management will therefore start from a clear definition of the strategic priorities.

The right-to-left decomposition of the resulting objectives into outcomes and capabilities ensures the definition of the linkage between the required projects and the strategic priorities.

(3) Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders

The previous article in this Earned Benefit series [Piney 2018g] explained how stakeholder prioritization and engagement is supported within the EBF.

The PILS (“Power-Interest Laws for Stakeholders”) approach that is developed in that article allows the benefits realization team to identify the prime areas of interest of each stakeholder within the BRM, and to consider other areas to focus on due to the stakeholder’s emergent power or enhanced interest in related areas. Correctly applied, this ensures that the stakeholders receive the type and amount of information required for engaging their enthusiastic commitment to the successful realization of the business objectives.

(5) Too little attention to breaking development and implementation into manageable steps

This is the second of three sources of failure that Stretton identifies as failures of project management. The other two are risk management and team management. This specific cause is much more prevalent in programs than in projects. The reason for this is, once again, that the generally-applied practice is to attempt to manage programs with project-management tools.

Whereas the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) is a well-developed and generally used technique for decomposing projects into manageable steps, it is unsuited for dealing with the multiple interdependencies between initiatives, capabilities, outcomes and benefits in programs. This is the role of the Benefits Realization Map described above.

In this area, Stretton states: “[...] most of the detailed causes of failure in this group [relate] to topics that are already very extensively covered in most project management standards – i.e. bodies of knowledge. This surely should raise questions about the actual utility of all these guidelines and allied documentation – questions which appear to me to be all too seldom addressed.” I, however, do not question the values of the concepts, tools and techniques recommended in these standards and allied documentation. However, they are bound to fail miserably if applied to endeavours to which they are not suited. You can no more manage a complex program in the same way as a project than you can safely drive a racing car using your skills as a saloon car driver.

Benefits mapping solves this issue by providing the discipline for ensuring that the development and implementation are broken down into manageable steps.

(6) Evaluation of proposals driven by initial price rather than long-term value for money

This is a key area in which the EBF should be used to support an honest and objective process. Its use provides a solution to all of the issues just listed, including this one.

The main steps are shown in Figure 2 and associated with the identification numbers of the causes of failure listed above. The organizational roles that should be involved at various stages are also indicated.

This diagram is explained in more detail below.

As explained earlier, the starting-point for any program should be the clear definition of the business objectives: what they are, how to assess you have achieved them, and, of course, the financial criteria for success based, initially, solely on the projected value of the result. This financial projection can be based on a number of different financial standards such as the level (actual or potential) of the benefit-related result at a given point in time, in terms of absolute or present value of the cumulative beneficial result, or a predetermined proxy value in the case of non-tangible benefits. This is the responsibility of strategic management in collaboration, normally, with business analysis experts.

This initial forecast should be clearly documented and provisionally approved (point A in Figure 2). Additional verification should be carried out as the BRM is developed.

Once the business objectives have been defined, the next action for creating the BRM is to break them down into beneficial outcomes. At each major step, senior management and the business analysis experts should specify each of the new nodes unambiguously. The logic and assumptions involved should be documented and their correctness and credibility validated (point B in Figure 2). This decomposition and dependency evaluation should be carried out in successive steps as far as determining the capabilities that would be required in order to achieve the outcomes that have been defined (this is described in greater detail in Piney 2018b). A new – provisional – validation of the model should be carried out at this point.

Once this step has been completed, the business analysis team should determine the contribution fraction of each dependency link and use these values to evaluate the potential contribution of every node in the BRM as described in Piney 2018c. The definitive validation of the model from a business analysis point of view can now be carried out (point C in Figure 2). For each of the nodes, the validation team can consider whether or not the calculated contribution is representative of their view of the component in question. In case of disagreement, the model should be modified and reworked until agreement is reached.

Once the capabilities have been validated in this way, the responsibility for the final steps of decomposition falls to the technical experts. They need to define the projects and their interactions required to create the capabilities specified. At this point, in mature organizations, the project management team would be brought in to work with the technical team. In order to ensure that the final model is as impartial and therefore as realistic (and achievable) as possible, it is important that the work on defining and estimating the required projects is allowed to be carried out without the evaluation team being informed of any expectations or political considerations that could impact the objectivity of their estimates – especially the forecast contributions of the project components.

These forecast contributions should only be provided once the cost and time estimates have been developed and agreed-upon formally as outlined above. The specifications of each initiative can only then be signed-off in the form of a project charter that includes all of these details. The need for the early involvement of the project management organization in this process is echoed by Stretton: “In the context of the project component(s) of the strategic initiative(s), failures in adequately specifying the project requirements ‘right’ appear to be most likely to happen when the project is ‘thrown over the wall’ from the strategic planning domain to the project management domain. So, such failures potentially apply to documents which are sometimes called charters, or briefs, or similar.”

The final step in creating a proposal driven by long-term value for money rather than initial price is to apply the Benefits Realization Evaluation Workflow (BREW) to create a fully-quantified cash-flow forecast as described in Piney 2018f.

This then allows the final review of the model and approval or rejection of the program as a whole (point D in Figure 2).

To ensure that each of the steps is carried out correctly and honestly, each verification should be part of what Jenner characterizes as “gates with teeth” to overcome simplistic thinking and political manipulation (mastication vs. machination?). One outcome of each such review should be a brief set of minutes presenting the assumptions that went into the decisions and the names of the people associated with each assumption. These minutes, along with the quantified model should be used as key inputs for determining lessons to be learned at subsequent progress and post-implementation reviews.

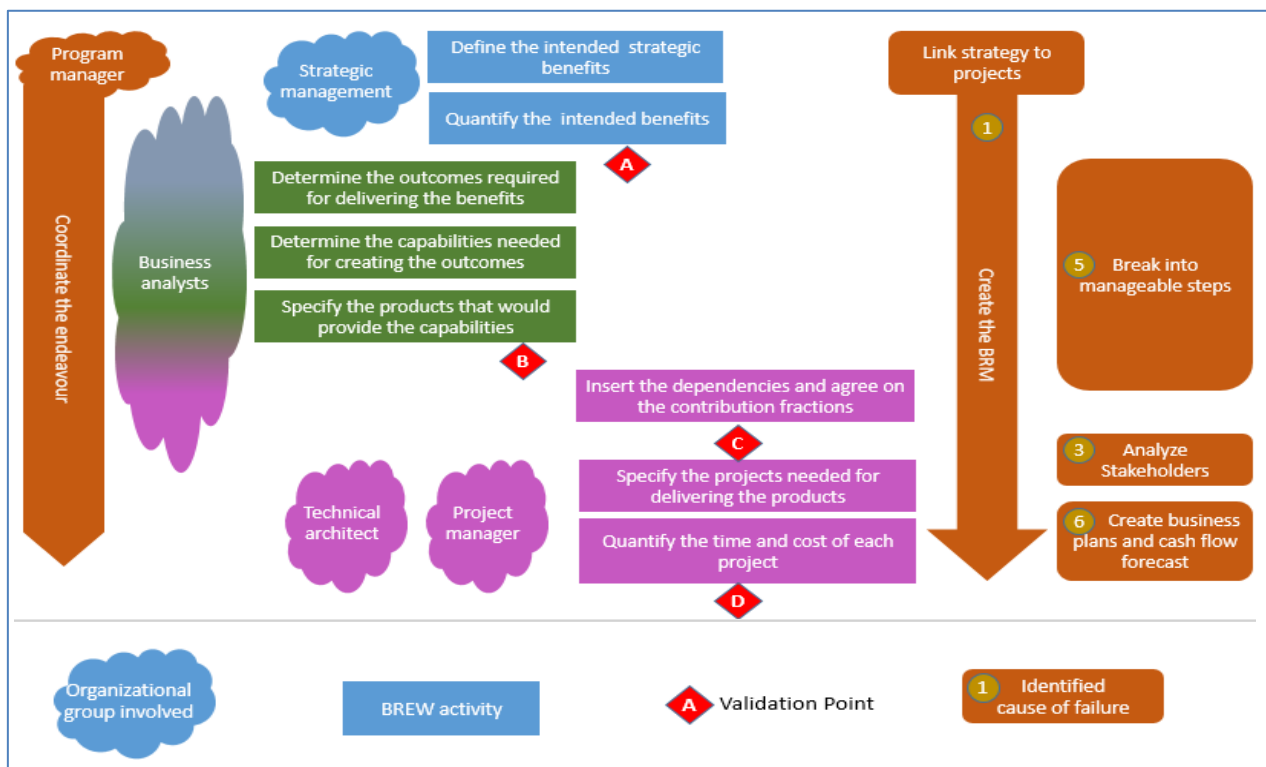


Figure 2: The BREW: the Steps for Developing an Objective Program Proposal Based on Value

The BREW also provides the answer to other causes of failure,

The Power of the BREW

Stretton lists additional causes of project failure as identified by Jenner.

These causes will be eliminated in any organization that applies the BREW correctly as defined above, (the identifying letters below correspond to those in Stretton’s Table 2):

(a) The separation of strategy formulation (‘choosing’) from implementation (‘doing’)

When implementing the BREW, the organization is compelled to develop and quantify the links between the desired result and the required activities. Reading the resulting quantified BRM from right to left explains the prerequisites for achieving the chosen strategic result. The left-to-right story explains how the results of doing the activities lead across to the beneficial outcomes. In this way, strategic formulation is logically entwined with implementation planning. This is shown schematically in Figure 3.



Figure 3: How the BRM Ensures a Clear Linkage Between Choosing and Doing

(b) Adopting activity-based rather than results or benefits-led change

This erroneous approach comes from attempting to build the BRM from left to right. As explained just above, the correct approach is to favour the “choosing” path rather than the “doing” path shown in Figure 3. The formal process to be followed is shown in Figure 2.

(e) Poorly defined requirements

The validation steps described in the BREW process ensure that the strategic goals are effectively mapped into validated requirements, both at the business level – the “choosing” focus – as well as for the technical implementation – the “doing” focus, including all of the points in between.

(g) Unrealistic cost estimates and/or benefits forecasts

Here, as well, the BREW validation process of separating cost from value estimating – in terms of process as well as in terms of organizational entities – should reduce the likelihood of all but the most deliberate estimating and forecasting misrepresentation.

(h) Failure to develop a range of credible & genuine options to address the problems/opportunities

The way in which the BRM is “grown” from the end-goal avoids the risk of limiting the set of options due to restrictions that could arise from earlier technical choices (this feature is known in economics as “path dependence”). Working back right-to-left from the required destination means that all potential paths towards a solution can be seen and taken into account before any decision is made as to what should exist immediately downstream to allow the current node to succeed. In contrast to path dependence which is option-limiting, this approach carries the creative risk of suggesting a number of unrealistic options, that then need to be analyzed and, potentially, rejected. That, however, is the cost of creativity and innovation.

There are, however, two topics in Stretton’s Table 2 which are not immediately addressed by the current BREW.

Extending the BREW

The two topics that could be addressed by the BREW with some modifications to the process are:

(c) Failure to adequately address transition management

(d) Failure to include all required business changes within the scope of the initiative

The component initiatives in the case studies presented in this series have been restricted to the set of technical activities. This is an oversight on my part analogous to the two causes of failure just listed. In theory, there is no reason in the Earned Benefit processes or in the algorithms why an extra two categories of initiatives should not be included: operational (including transition), and organizational initiatives. The addition of these two categories to the BREW will serve to address these two failures and allow all of the components that can affect time, cost and risk to be taken effectively into account.

The required changes have been made to the case study by the addition of two new initiatives as shown Figure 4:

- Node N = *Retrain Call Handlers* as an organizational initiative estimated at €10,000
 - it contributes to node F = *Effective Customer Communications*, and
- Node O = *Hand Over to Operations* as an operational initiative costing €5,000
 - it contributes to two nodes: E = *Call Documentation and Tracking*, and J = *Continuous Improvement*.

The contribution fractions have been reworked based on a new convention that states that all operational and organizational initiatives contribute 30% to the destination. The other contribution fractions have been adjusted correspondingly from the previous analysis. Note that all dependency links that were sole contributors prior to the addition of links related to operational and organizational initiatives should be characterized as “essential” because

organizational and operational initiatives do not, on their own, “create” the corresponding outcome or capability. In the case study, this applies to the link from B to E.

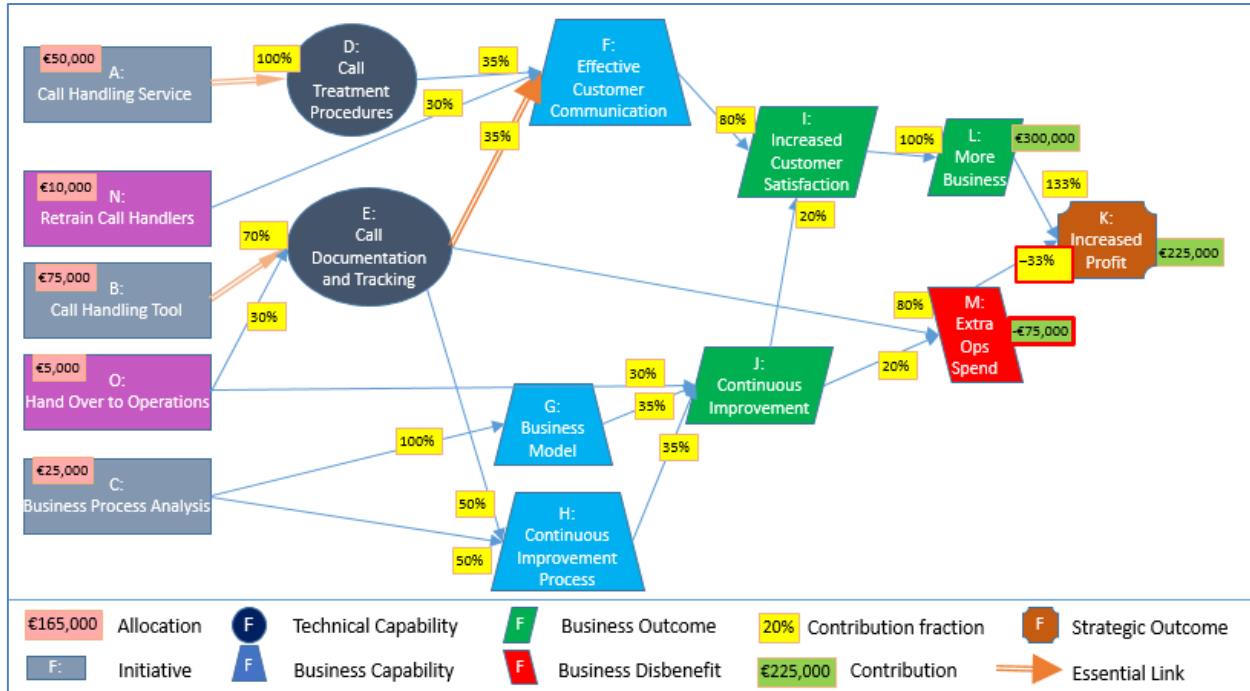


Figure 4: Case Study BRM Expanded to Include Organizational and Operational Initiatives

This expanded BRM can then be recalculated using the BAR and BEER algorithms to evaluate the new business model. The results are shown in Table 1.

		Allocation	Contribution
A	Call Handling Service	€50,000	€83,790
B	Call Handling Tool	€75,000	€22,586
C	Business Process Analysis	€25,000	€23,625
D	Call Treatment Procedures	€50,000	€83,790
E	Call Documentation and Tracking	€77,088	€32,265
F	Effective Customer Communication	€260,192	€239,400
G	Business Model	€16,667	€15,750
H	Continuous Improvement process	€27,148	€15,750
I	Increased Customer Satisfaction	€322,339	€299,250
J	Continuous Improvement	€46,727	€45,000
L	More Business	€322,339	€299,250
M	Extra Ops Spend	-€157,339	-€74,250
K	Increased Profit	€165,000	€225,000
N	Retrain Call Handlers	€10,000	€71,820
O	Hand Over to Operations	€5,000	€23,180

Table 1: Analysis of Contributions and Allocations for the Expanded BRM

The analysis of the expanded BRM shows that the effect of including of the two extra nodes is to cause virtually all of the previous components of the model to appear to be loss-making, whereas

the two newly-added nodes (N and O) show their large value-added. Overall, however, the return on investment (ROI) of the program is €225,000 – €165,000 = €60,000 for an investment of €165,000.

In this case, although the individual ROI of each program component has changed considerably from the earlier version which overlooked operational and organizational initiatives (Table 2), overall, the program is still shown to be viable.

		Allocation	Contribution
A	Call Handling Service	€50,000	€120,000
B	Call Handling Tool	€75,000	€71,250
C	Business Process Analysis	€25,000	€33,750
D	Call Treatment Procedures	€50,000	€120,000
E	Call Documentation and Tracking	€75,000	€71,250
F	Effective Customer Communication	€176,316	€240,000
G	Business Model	€16,667	€22,500
H	Continuous Improvement process	€20,175	€22,500
I	Increased Customer Satisfaction	€225,439	€300,000
J	Continuous Improvement	\$36,842	€45,000
L	More Business	\$225,439	€300,000
M	Extra Ops Spend	-\$75,439	-€75,000
K	Increased Profit	\$150,000	€225,000

Table 2: Analysis of Contributions and Allocations for Original Case Study Example

The principal reason for the difference in the calculated ROI of the components is the way in which the analysis has identified the large value-added due to the organizational and operational initiatives (N = *Retrain Call Handlers* at €71,280 and O = *Hand Over to Operations* at €23,180) – a total of €95,000. In the original model, this sum was attributed directly to the contributions of other components: for example, the *Call Handling Tool* (node B) has “lost” over €48,000 of its value. On the other hand, the contributions of *Customer Communication* and *Customer Satisfaction* (nodes F and I) are virtually unchanged, whereas the cost of achieving each of them (i.e., the allocations) has increased by over €80,000. Analyzed out of context, therefore, it would seem as if the original premise that *Customer Satisfaction* was the key to enhanced profits was totally wrong. However, as a contributor to the program synergy, it remains a key component of what is, in fact, a viable and worthwhile program.

This analysis highlights the importance, as listed by Jenner and repeated by Stretton, of “adequately addressing transition management” as well as “including all required business changes within the scope of the initiative”. Failure to do so for the case study would remove the contributions of the two corresponding projects (N = *Retrain Call Handlers* at €71,280 and O = *Hand Over to Operations* at €23,180), with the resulting negative impact of €95,000 on the overall value of the program, thereby changing a potential €60,000 profit into a €35,000 loss.

Another interesting incidental insight is the considerable importance of people in all endeavours. In this example, the key role of the call handlers is highlighted by the contribution obtained from

training them for the modified environment. The training contributes €71,820 for a cost allocation of €10,000,

This striking example provides a clear explanation of the origin of the failures in this category, as well as the potential offered by the EBF as a basis for eliminating the corresponding causes. However, at this point, we only have the “potential”. Knowing what needs to be done is not the same as actually doing it.

The EBF is Not a Panacea

Stretton’s article describes a number of causes of failure that are beyond the scope of the Earned Benefit Framework. These include the following:

- (2) Lack of clear senior management and ministerial ownership and leadership*
- (4) Lack of skills and proven approach to project management and risk management*
- (7) Lack of understanding of and contact with the supply industry at senior organisation levels*
- (8) Lack of effective project team integration between clients, the supplier team and chain*
- (f) Governance failures*

Stretton also raises a more general question as to the actual utility of standards and guidelines in the area of project management when it has been shown that failures due to clearly-identified causes are still widespread. In my opinion, it is not the standards and guidelines that are at fault, but the fact that senior management in a large proportion of organizations has not been willing to modify their behaviour accordingly and create an organization that supports the effective application of the standards, guidelines and required discipline at all levels of the organization. Recent developments could help to change this situation.

All of these shortcomings should be addressed – and solutions provided – by the adoption of a comprehensive Organizational Project Management (OPM) model [PMI (2018)]. This OPM standard presents the basic principles and proposes an approach for developing the structure and capabilities required in an organization for it to achieve its strategic objectives. Jenner quotes Nelson et al. [Nelson 2008] on the importance, as part of this organizational structure, of “ensuring that, ‘people truly understand what they are responsible for and who makes which decisions – and then giving them the information they need to fulfil their responsibilities.’” I would add the following: “and giving them the authority and adequate resources to perform their role effectively”. In the long run, removal of roadblocks is even more important than giving each project manager the power to bypass them. This would be achieved adopting the OPM model and integrating the EBF as an organizational enabler into the working practices at all levels of the organization.

Conclusion: CSF v. CSF

Several years ago at a conference, both David Hillson and I realized we had both separately adopted the term Common Sources of Failure (CSFs) as a basis for determining Critical Success Factors (CSFs). The current article has explained how the Earned Benefit Framework, with its various techniques and methods, is a critical success factor in addressing a number of the common sources of failure described in the articles by Stretton and Jenner.

The adoption of an Organizational Project Management Model that incorporates the Earned Benefit Framework would significantly improve the rate of success of strategic investments, as well as providing a greater degree of control and visibility to all levels of the organization. The benefits for senior management would include greater value from project investments, increased innovation, and greater shareholder confidence in the ability of the organization to deliver on its promises. All that is missing now is executive management awareness associated with the will to change.

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About the Author



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After many years managing international IT projects within large corporations, **Crispin (“Kik”) Piney**, B.Sc., PgMP is now a freelance project management consultant based in the South of France. At present, his main areas of focus are benefits realization management, risk management, integrated Portfolio, Program and Project management, as well as time and cost control. He has developed advanced training courses on these topics, which he delivers in English and in French to international audiences from various industries.

Kik has carried out work for PMI on the first Edition of the Organizational Project Management Maturity Model (*OPM3™*) as well as participating actively in fourth edition of the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* and was also vice-chairman of the Translation Verification Committee for the Third Edition. He was a significant contributor to the second edition of both PMI’s Standard for Program Management as well as the Standard for Portfolio Management. In 2008, he was the first person in France to receive PMI’s PgMP® credential; he was also the first recipient in France of the PfMP® credential. He has acted as subject matter expert on many of PMI’s recent standards and practice guides. He is co-author of PMI’s *Practice Standard for Risk Management*. He collaborates with David Hillson (the “Risk Doctor”) by translating his monthly risk briefings into French. He has presented at a number of recent PMI conferences and published formal papers.

Kik Piney is the author of the book [*Earned Benefit Program Management, Aligning, Realizing and Sustaining Strategy*](#), published by CRC Press in 2018

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