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Managing the front-end of projects
by Alan Stretton
Commentary

A commentary on managing the front-end of projects[1]

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in this journal (Stretton 2019c) I discussed expanding the scope of project management services in the construction industry, to add value and reduce costs. This was essentially a discussion of some of the additional contributions that project management has made in the building-and-construction industries by becoming progressively more involved in actively managing the front-end of projects.

Whilst I do not know the extent to which these experiences in the building-and-construction industry are applicable to other project management application areas and/or other types of projects, I suggested that they may be relevant in many, if not most, other contexts. This commentary looks at some aspects of managing project front-ends in a more generalised context, based largely on some discussions on the nature of such front-ends by Morris 2013.

VARYING STAGES OF PROJECT FRONT-ENDS

Morris 2013:164 asks the question "But what do we mean by the front-end?", and discusses three representations. I borrow from his Figure 11.1, and its accompanying note, in presenting the following figure to illustrate his three ways of representing the scope of the front-end.
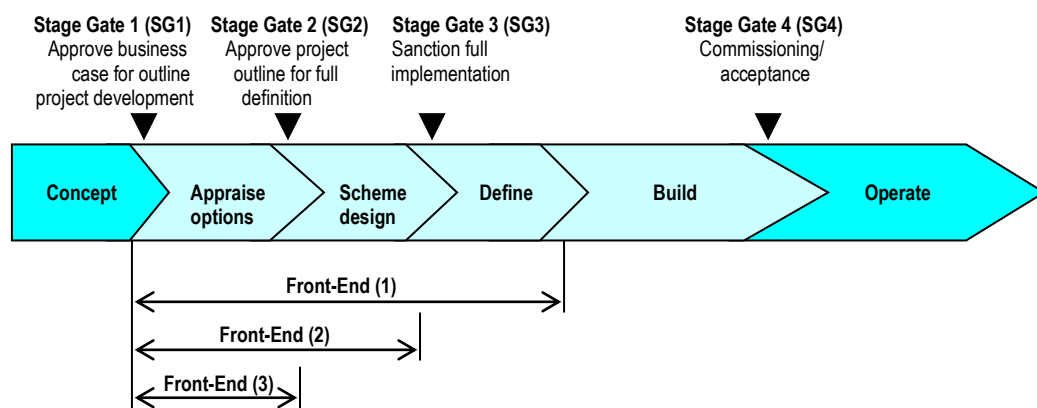
Figure 1: Three different representations of the scope of a project's front-end.
Adapted from Morris 2013, Figure 11.1: Roles in the management of projects

With these three representations, it can be seen that a project's front-end is not easy to define in a generalised way. In each of the above the front-end it starts after Stage Gate 1. In its most extended representation it can to go the end of project definition. Or it can

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extend to any point between these two – Morris has indicted two such points at SG2 and SG3. We will now go on to look more closely at who is responsible for managing these various front-end stages, and also for managing the subsequent project work, which could be broadly called project implementation.

WHO MANAGES PROJECT FRONT-END STAGES?

The question as asked by Morris 2013

Morris 2013:235 asks this question in the following quotation (and gives his well-known preference).

> In practice, in many organisations, the term [project management] is also used to refer only to the management of project execution (after requirements have been identified). If this is the case, we need to ask, what is the discipline that is responsible for managing the front-end stage of the life-cycle – development management? (To me, it would seem best to extend project management to include this activity.)

If project management is not responsible for managing front-end stages, Morris asks if "development management" would have this responsibility. But, where would such a discipline be located, in what broader context? We now look at an organisational strategic management framework as providing an appropriate broader context.

Project management in the context of organisational strategic management

I aim to approach responding to the above question in the context of the contribution that project management makes to the achievement of organisational strategic objectives. I have been discussing project management in this context in many recent articles in this journal, because this context appears to be relevant to most projects, irrespective of their type, application area, etc.. most of the time.

Morris 2013:257-8 also puts the relationship between project management and organisational strategy in quite a pro-active way, as follows.

> "Those shaping and executing the projects which flow from an enterprise's strategy can, and should, challenge and contribute to the unfolding of that strategy. … project management has more of a contribution to make to strategy implementation than simply ensuring alignment and being efficient in execution. It can add value to the emerging strategy and ensure that benefits are reaped from its realisation"

In light of the above, I have broadly aligned Morris' project management stages from Figure 1 with the basic five stages of organisational strategic management which I have been using for some time, as shown in Figure 2. Morris' stages are a little different from those I have previously used, but the alignment is still quite good.

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ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT			ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY EXECUTION	
1. Establish strategic objectives	2. Develop strategic options, evaluate, choose the best	3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve strategic objectives.

Concept → Appraise options → Scheme design → Define → Build → Operate
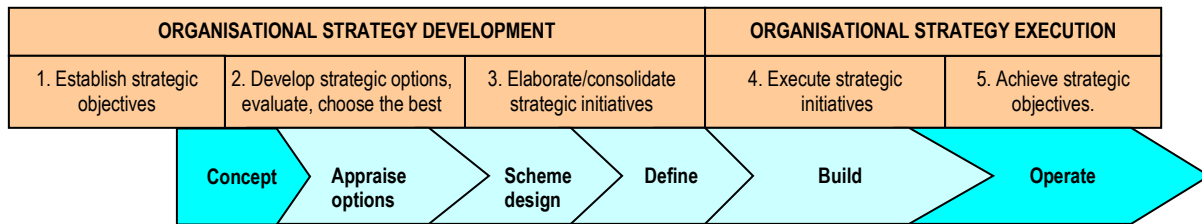
Figure 2: Aligning project life-cycle stages with five basic organisational strategic mgt. stages

I have overlapped the project *Concept* between Strategy stages 1 and 2, on the basis that the former broadly derives from both the strategic objectives and the developing strategic initiatives, or must soon be aligned with them.

In discussions in earlier articles on organisational strategic management and projects, I have pointed out that there are generally two components of organisational strategic initiatives – projects, and *other strategic work.* I discussed the latter in some detail in Stretton 2019a. However, in this article I am focusing on the project components and their management, and will not complicate matters by including any further discussion of the management of *other strategic work*.

Possible combinations of Strategy Mgt & PM responsibilities for front-end mgt

If we adopt the alignment of strategic and project stages in Figure 2, we can attribute front-end work which is not done by project management to people working in the organisational strategy planning/development domain. If we now consider the three different representations of the scope of a project's front-end in Figure 1, we can propose four different combinations of responsibilities for strategy management people on the one hand, and project management (PM) people on the other. I have bolded the typing and arrows of the stages of PM responsibilities in Figure 3.
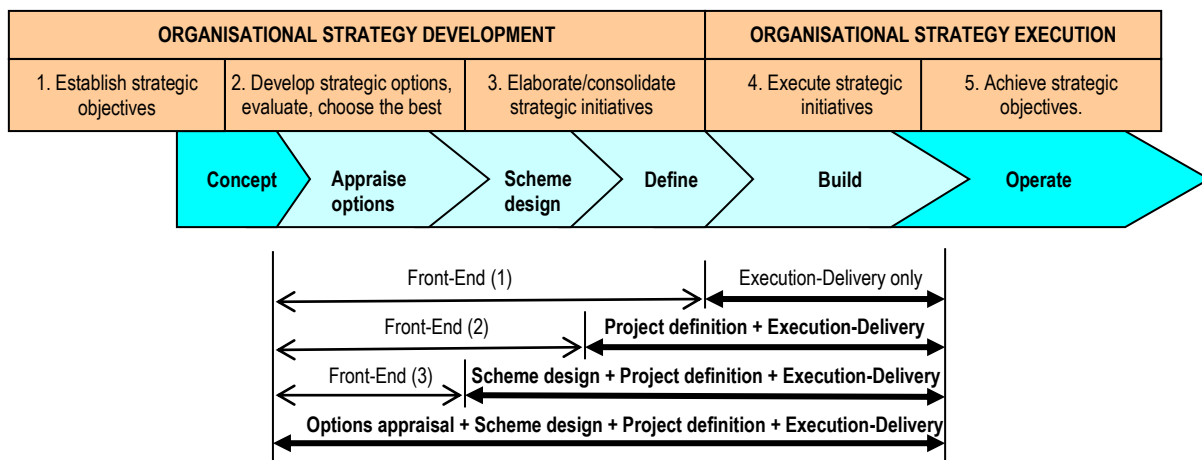
ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT			ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY EXECUTION	
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Concept → Appraise options → Scheme design → Define → Build → Operate

Front-End (1) ←→ Execution-Delivery only
Front-End (2) ←→ **Project definition + Execution-Delivery**
Front-End (3) ←→ **Scheme design + Project definition + Execution-Delivery**
Options appraisal + Scheme design + Project definition + Execution-Delivery

Figure 3: Four possible combinations of Strategy Mgt. & PM responsibilities for front-end mgt.

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Discussion on varying degrees of PM involvement in front-end stages

We now briefly look at some ramifications of varying degrees and types of project management involvement – or lack thereof – in the front-end stages of projects.

Execution-delivery-only PM involvement

As noted in an earlier quotation, Morris 2013:235 observed that many organisations use the term project management to refer only to the management of project execution, after the requirements have been identified. This perception of the scope of project management is also still quite widely held by many project managers.

This perception tends to be reinforced by the fact that the most widely used project management "standard", PMI's PMBOK Guide, is heavily focused on execution-delivery processes.

Also, of course, this is by far the most widely practiced and most visible form of project management. However, we do not have a particularly good record of success in managing such projects. For example, we have continuing bad publicity around the world on overruns on many, if not most, major infrastructure and transportation projects. Another example is software development projects, where success rates evidently remain too low.

So, there is still plenty of work to be done to improve performance in the execution-delivery-only area of project management. However, as I discussed in the context of the construction industry in Stretton 2019c, there are many opportunities to add greater value to customers/sponsors by involving project management's distinctive knowledge and skill-sets in earlier front-end stages of projects, as now discussed.

Adding PM involvement in project definition

Poor project definition and incomplete requirements featured all too prominently as causes of project failure in some of my previous articles in this journal on the subject of so-called project successes and failures (e.g. Stretton 2015a, 2018a). There can be little doubt that these causes occurred because project management was not involved either in project definition, or the requirements elicitation work leading to it.

The best and most obvious way of overcoming this problem is for the project definition to be actively undertaken and managed by suitably qualified project managers. After all, who else is better qualified to undertake this work?

If, for whatever reason, this work cannot be actively undertaken by project managers, there is still a responsibility for someone to check that the project definition has been properly done. As Morris 2013:187 says,

> ….anyone responsible for the overall project success ought to ensure that requirements elicitation is happening properly. In other words, to be manager of the project.

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### *Adding PM involvement in scheme design*

Looking at Figure 1, we see that scheme design follows Stage Gate 2, where approval is given for the project outline to be developed to the point where full definition can be undertaken.

Here, again, it appears to be blindingly obvious that this work would best be undertaken by suitably qualified project managers, who are versed in the processes of progressive elaboration of project requirements, and are therefore better placed than anyone else to add extra value at this critically important stage.

Adding PM involvement in options appraisal

In several of my earlier articles in the journal (e.g. Stretton 2018e, 2018k) I have discussed the primary importance of developing a range of credible and genuine strategic initiative options in Stage 2 of the organisational strategic management processes. Projects are a key component of such strategic initiatives, and Morris' "Appraise options" stage of the project life-cycle reflects the importance of this very early front-end stage. Again, it is obvious that development, and particularly comparison of options for the project components is best done by suitably qualified project managers. On the comparison side, early cost estimating is no field for the non-project amateur.

In his Figure 11.1, Morris 2013:164 depicted the span of the roles of three key players in the management of projects, covering all the above front-end stages, as follows.
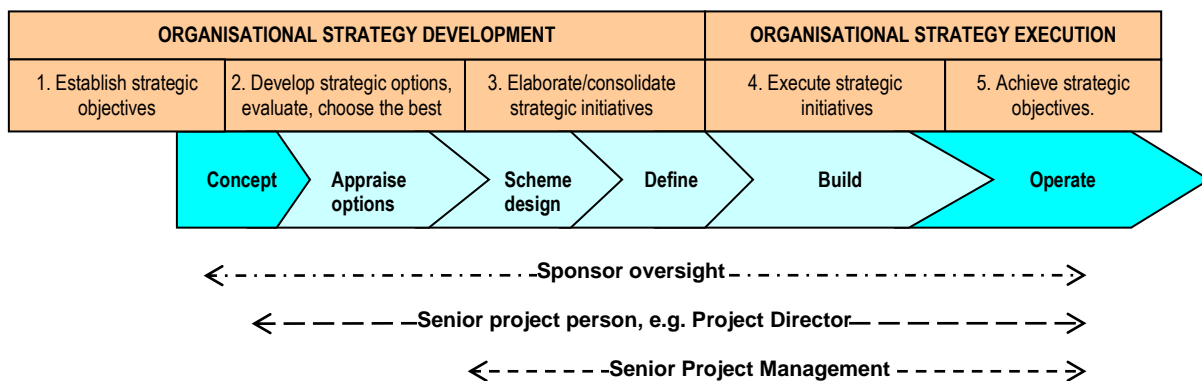
Figure 4: Roles of three key players in the management of projects.
Adapted from Morris 2013:164, Figure 11.1 Roles in the management of projects

A particularly attractive feature of having these two sets of senior project people covering the front-end stages as depicted by Morris is that there are then people in place who have the authority to ensure that project managers can, and do, actually participate fully in front-end stages, along the lines discussed above.

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FURTHER FRONT-END EXTENSIONS INTO ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES?

In Stretton 2019c, in the context of projects in the building and construction industries, I discussed two areas in which project management firms have added the provision of organisational strategic planning support to their other front-end services, and asked the question as to whether there were similar opportunities in other contexts.

I do not have an answer to this question, but it remains an interesting, and potentially very relevant, question.

CONCLUSION

This article is yet another attempt to elaborate on the theme that we still have enormous areas of untapped opportunity for project management to contribute much more value than it currently does to project outcomes, by being much more strongly involved in developing project front-ends than it currently does.

However, in spite of very substantial contributions by many people over many years advocating such involvement, little progress appears to have been made. We still seem to be in the situation described by Morris 2013:165, as follows.

> Given the confusion over what has to be done to manage the project front-end effectively, it should thus come as no surprise that there is little evidence of the project management community seeing an opportunity here for it to add value by bringing its distinctive knowledge and skill-sets to bear to improve the project's or program's emerging strategy.

To describe the continuing failure by project management to seize this opportunity as being myopic is to put it mildly. It is more like blindness, and trying to describe this opportunity-loss seems to many of us like trying to describe colour to a blind man. One can only hope that full vision will soon be restored, before members of some other less qualified avocation take over this space and claim it for themselves.

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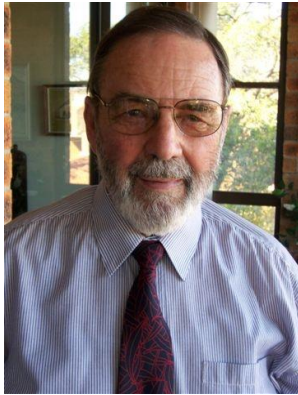
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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management 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 200 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.