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2. Contexts of organisational strategic management
Series on Project Contexts
by Alan Stretton

Series on project contexts

2. Contexts of organisational strategic management[1]

By Alan Stretton
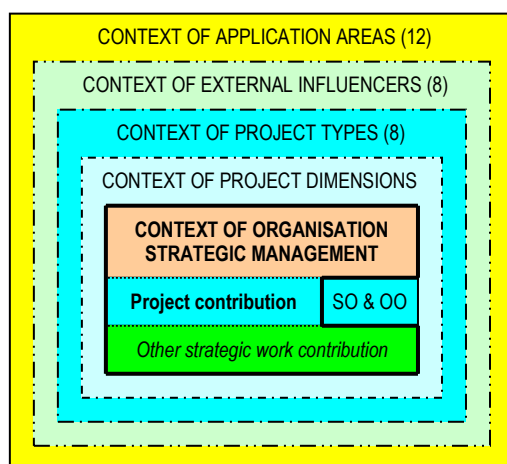
INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Outline project context model

This is the second of a series of seven articles which identify and discuss a variety of key contexts which impact on the management of projects. The basic reason for developing this series is that there is far too little attention given to the contexts of projects in the relevant literature – particularly when you consider that, in practice, effective management of projects' contexts is usually quite critical to achieving overall project management success.

The first article of this series (Stretton 2019e) identified six key types of project contexts. These were summarised pictorially into a combined model, depicted in skeleton format in Figure 1 to the left.

This second article is concerned with extending discussions on the first of the contexts developed in the first article, namely the context of organisational strategic management. The place of this context in the broader pictorial model is indicated in Figure 1 by the bolder typeface within the more heavily outlined sector.

RECAPPING REPRESENTATIONS OF PROJECTS IN THE ORGANISATION STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT CONTEXT IN THE FIRST ARTICLE

I discussed aspects of this particular context in Stretton 2019e, under the following headings, as now summarised.

Project contributions to organisational strategic management

This section established that virtually all projects, no matter how originated, are, or soon become, direct components of organisational strategic plans and their execution. It therefore seemed reasonable to first consider projects in the context of the organisational strategies of which they are a part.

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An organisational strategic management framework

Adding the project components of strategic initiatives to this framework

These two sections were represented as shown in Figure 2. It was acknowledged that there are no universally agreed sets of processes for either the strategic or project life-cycle frameworks, but it was contended that these rather broad-brush representations should be widely applicable.

Figure 2: An organisational strategic management framework, with project contributions

Adding other strategic work components to this framework

I have made the point in many previous articles that strategic initiatives comprise both projects and what I have described as *other strategic work*, which was discussed in some detail in Stretton 2019a. Components of the latter were added to Figure 2, and the combined representation abbreviated, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Abbreviated strategic management framework, PLC, & "Other strategic work" stages

The context of organisational strategic management

Figure 4: Compacted org. strategic mgt. context

Finally, Figure 3 was recast into a more compact format, which, in turn has been abbreviated and partly re-ordered into the even more highly compacted format indicated by the heavily outlined sector in Figure 1 above, and reproduced as Figure 4 on the left.

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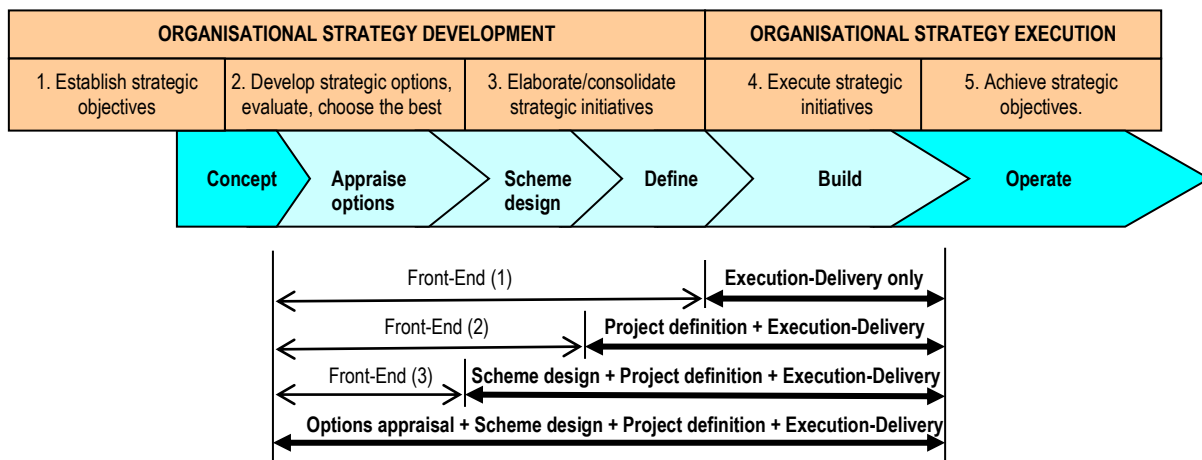by Alan Stretton

It will be noted that the project life-cycle has been represented in Figures 2 and 3 above with an incubation phase commencing in Stage 2 of the organisational strategic framework, with feasibility and definition phases corresponding to Stage 3, and design and execution phases to Stage 4. However, who manages the pre-execution phases is another, and often complicated, issue, to which we now turn.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE CONTEXTS OF ORIGINATING AND DEVELOPING PROJECT AND STRATEGIC FRONT ENDS?

Although I have seen no hard data on this matter, the real world situation appears to be that, all too often, project management is not involved in managing the project incubation, feasibility and/or definition phases – or is not even consulted about key decisions made in those phases. The most common scenario appears to be that active project management is confined to the execution phase.

I have been one of many writers who have been pressing for much more extensive involvement by project management in the pre-execution phases of projects, because this represents an opportunity for project management to contribute much more value than it currently does to project outcomes. My most recent articles on this subject have been Stretton 2019c in the particular context of the construction industry, and in a more generalised context in Stretton 2019d – both in this journal. I will not attempt to summarise them, but simply make a couple of points.

The first point is that extent to which project managers actually become involved in pre-execution phases of projects evidently varies hugely – from no involvement at all, through to complete management of all phases. This was illustrated in Stretton 2019d, where I borrowed from a figure by Morris 2013 to illustrate four possible degrees of overall involvement by project managers (assuming that strategic planning staff do the work which is not done by project managers). These are shown in Figure 5 below in bolder typeface and arrows. (Morris' project phases are slightly different from mine, but that is not particularly relevant to the purpose of this representation).

Figure 5: Four possible combinations of Strategy Mgt. & PM responsibilities for front-end mgt.

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The argument for direct involvement by project management in these pre-execution phases is quite straight-forward. Prosecution of these phases involves substantial levels of project-related input. If this work is done by non-project people it will inevitably be less effectively executed than if done by appropriately qualified project managers. In Civil & Civic we began project managing the front end of projects over half a century ago, as will be recounted in part in the next article of this series, in the context of a supplier organisation (SO) providing project management services to external clients. We also provided an extension of this form of project management into helping clients develop their organisational strategies, as will also be discussed.
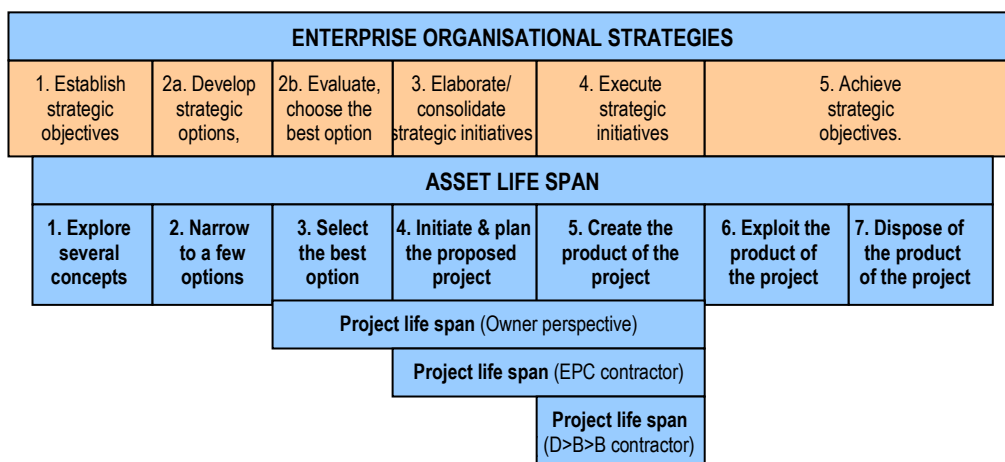
We now turn from the early stages of projects and strategies to the late stage of realisation of strategic benefits, where we will be looking at projects in the longer-term contexts of organisational strategic management life-spans, focusing particularly on the life-spans of assets created by projects.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE CONTEXTS OF LONGER-TERM ASSET AND STRATEGIC LIFE-SPANS?

Giammalvo's perspective on asset and strategic life spans

A longer-term perspective on asset and strategic life spans was brought to my attention in a recent article by Paul Giammalvo in this journal (Giammalvo 2019) He discusses a particular range of organisational strategic management initiatives, namely the "creation, acquisition, expansion, repair, upgrading and eventual disposal" of organizational assets.

The blue-coloured sections of Figure 6 below are derived directly from Giammalvo's Figure 1, although covering only some of the quite detailed components of his figure. In particular, in the lower sections of the figure it headlines the seven stages of his Asset Life Span, and how three perceptions of project life spans by different participants relate to these.

ENTERPRISE ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES					
1. Establish strategic objectives	2a. Develop strategic options,	2b. Evaluate, choose the best option	3. Elaborate/ consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve strategic objectives.

ASSET LIFE SPAN						
1. Explore several concepts	**2. Narrow to a few options**	**3. Select the best option**	**4. Initiate & plan the proposed project**	**5. Create the product of the project**	**6. Exploit the product of the project**	**7. Dispose of the product of the project**

Project life span (Owner perspective)

Project life span (EPC contractor)

Project life span (D>B>B contractor)

Figure 6: Some basic components of Giammalvo's Figure 1, with the addition of the six basic stages of the organisational strategy management framework from Figure 2 above

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Adding basic stages of the organisational strategy management framework

In Figure 6, under Giammalvo's heading "Enterprise Organisational Strategies", I have inserted the basic stages of the organisational strategy management framework shown in Figure 2. I have made just one change to its stages, namely splitting what was Stage 2 into two sub-stages, shown as Stages 2a and 2b.

It can be seen that there is a very close match between Giammalvo's Asset Life Span phases and the basic stages of the organisational strategy management framework. This is what one would expect if these two sets of phases and stages had derived from the one source, simply because creating an asset is just one type of organisational strategic initiative. However, the sources of these phases/ stages are totally independent of each other, which suggests that they should be very widely applicable.

Now, the Asset Life Span phases have added a time dimension which is much longer than I had in mind when developing the Organisational Strategy management stages. This, of course, relates to Asset Life Span phases 6 and 7, which are concerned with utilising the asset to further the enterprise's on-going operations, and disposing of it when the time comes. This has caused me to notionally extend the time-frame of the organisational strategy's Stage 5: Achieve Strategic Objectives, into the very long term.

We now look at Giammalvo's presentation of three perceptions of project life spans, and how they relate to the asset life spans, and to the organisational strategic framework, in Figure 6 above.

Giammalvo's three perceptions of project life spans

It can be seen that Giammalvo's three perceptions of project life spans relate to different phases of his Asset Life Span, and to different stages of the Enterprise Organisational Strategies framework. I comment as follows.

Project Life Span (Owner perspective)

The owner perspective covers the whole of the project life-cycle (PLC) from initiation to delivery of the product of the project. This also corresponds with the highest level of potential project management involvement in the PLC depicted in Figure 5, namely that shown on the bottom line of that figure.

This corresponds with the active project management of the project's front-end phases advocated by Morris' Management of Projects (MoP) approach (Morris 2013), and supported by many other writers. It is, of course, also the approach I have been advocating in many previous articles, most recently in Stretton 2019d and 2019c in this journal.

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Project Life Span (EPC contractor)

EPC is shorthand for Engineering, Procurement and Construction, and is a widely used means of delivering projects, particularly very large ones. Giammelvo has placed the EPC contractor perception of the project life span as covering asset phases 4 and 5, which corresponds with Stages 3 and 4 of the strategic management framework. This is also represented by the second bottom line of Figure 5.

However, it should also be noted here that, as discussed in Stretton 2019c, some EPC contractors often contribute earlier to clients' strategic planning, particularly on certain types of mega-projects, in a process which is often called Front-End Loading.

Project Life Span (D>B>B contractor)

D>B>B is shorthand for Design>Bid>Build, which is the traditional tender approach, where the owner designs the project, puts it out for bid (tender), with the lowest responsible bidder (tenderer) building the project. This widely utilised form of procuring projects is also often described in the project management literature as the Execution-Delivery approach, which is the way it is represented in Figure 5.

Adding life spans of enterprises and their operations

I again borrow from Giammalvo 2019 in adding the contexts of the operating life span of the enterprise, and the life span of the total enterprise, as broadly depicted in his Figure 2, to my Figure 6, as shown below.
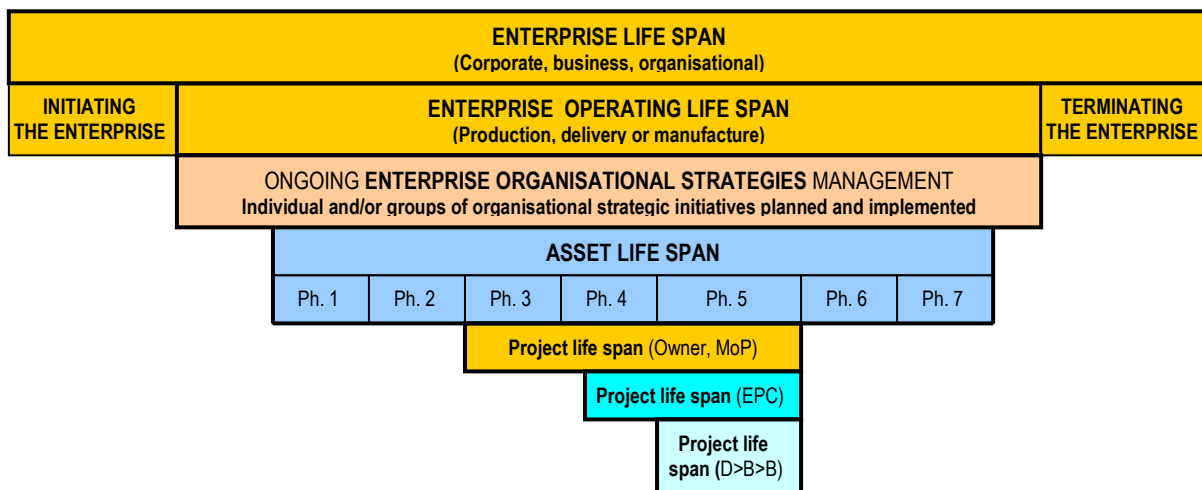
Figure 7: Adding enterprise operating life span and enterprise life span to Figure 6.

It will also be noted that I have expanded the descriptors in the "Enterprise Organisational Strategies" text box, in an endeavour to cater for two aspects. The upper line has been expanded to "Ongoing Enterprise Organisational Strategies Management", to provide for the fact that this is, indeed, an ongoing process throughout the operational life of the enterprise.

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The lower line, "Individual and/or groups of organisational strategic initiatives planned and implemented", essentially covers the stages of actually processing component strategic initiatives, as set down in Figure 6.

I am not sure about how useful this extended figure might be, but it does present the above discussions in the longest possible organisational time-related context.

Project life spans in the context of long-term asset life spans

Figure 7 illustrated how three perspectives of the life span of a project which helps create a physical asset relates to the context of the life span of that asset. This, in turn, has been broadly related to the contexts of the enterprise's organisational strategies management, its operating life span, and its entire life span.

However, Figure 7 does not give one a visual impression of the time-line implications of how the project relates to context of the asset life span. There is of course no typical example of such time-lines, so I will draw on an example from my own experience as an illustration. The example I have chosen is one of the assets created by my old employer, namely an office building called Lend Lease House, which was opened in 1960, and eventually demolished around 1994. The life span of this asset is representing on a time-line basis in Figure 8, using the asset phase numbers from Figure 7.

Ph.1-5	Asset Life Span Phase 6 – Lend Lease House	Ph. 7

| 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 1995 |
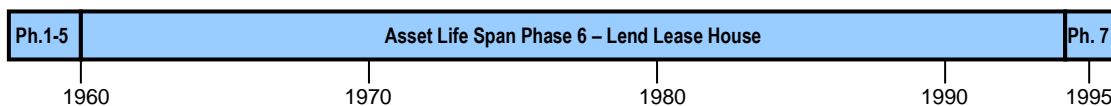
Figure 8: A time-scaled representation of the asset life span of Lend Lease House

This may look a bit lop-sided at first, but it helps put the intent of Figure 7 into a more realistic visual perspective. (In fact, thirty-five-odd years is a relatively short life span for central Sydney business offices, which are more commonly reckoned to have a fifty year life span. So, Figure 8 represents a somewhat conservative such example.)

In any event, whatever the nature of the assets, their life spans can be very long indeed, and this can be a very relevant issue when discussing how projects and their time-lines relate to such contexts. Giammalvo summarises one aspect in the following recommendation from his paper.

> 2) Stop positioning the Project Manager as the "star" of the show. The project manager is an important supporting actor, but the real stars of the show are the Asset and Operations Managers in their role as project SPONSORS. Those are the people who make the strategic decisions that determine whether a project will or will not enable the organization to "realize any benefits".

This helps put project contributions into perspective in an asset-related context. This situation also affects questions about the execution of *other strategic work*, which is often depicted as a program/project management responsibility, as now discussed.

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Responsibilities for *other strategic work* in the context of long asset life spans

This article has been primarily concerned with projects in the context of organisational strategic management. The other component of strategic initiatives, including assets, is *other strategic work*, as was briefly indicated in Figure 3, and in skeleton form in Figures 1 and 4.

First, I should qualify the above use of the descriptor *project,* by acknowledging that virtually all the relationships with *other strategic work* that I have seen in the project management literature have been in the context of programs, rather than projects per se. Indeed, in more recent times the majority of definitions of programs specifically include *other strategic work*, many along the lines of PMI 2013:4.

> Programs are comprised of various components – the majority of these being the individual projects within the program. Programs may also include other work related to the component projects such as training and operations and maintenance activities.

In Stretton 2019a I noted that the literature nominates many types of *other strategic work*, including the following which had been cited by more than one author.

- Business change (Dalcher 2017, Hudson 2016)
- Organisational change (Buttrick 2016, Dalcher 2017, Demaria & Sopko 2016, Koch & Lock 2016, Sedlmayer 2016)
- Education, training, behavioural change (Dalcher 2017, Hudson 2016, PMI 2017)
- Operational management/changes (Buttrick 2016, Hudson 2016, PMI 2017)
- Service management, maintenance functions (Buttrick 2016, PMI 2017)

Now, if we look at these in the context of the types of time-lines discussed earlier, we can see that, although the first three bullet-pointed examples of *other strategic* work, and perhaps even the fourth, may be initiated whilst the product of the project is being created (Phase 5 of the asset life span in Figure 6), the major part of each, and all of the last bullet-pointed type, would be undertaken in Phase 6 of the asset life span – i.e. while the product of the project is being operationally exploited (to use Giammalvo's terminology). Some of these could continue over very long time spans.

In these circumstances, it is difficult to see how these stages of ongoing mainstream *other strategic work* could be classified as program management work, because of such long time spans having elapsed since completion of the program's projects. The only way this would seem to make sense would be if the program work were dissociated from its component projects – which would essentially mean re-defining the nature of programs, even more radically than some recent re-definitions.

Overall, it would appear that, in the above long-term contexts, a good deal of *other strategic work* does not naturally lend itself to being undertaken as part of any programs. It would therefore seem reasonable to suggest that those writers who portray *other strategic work* as a program management responsibility should qualify their position in relation to such longer-term contexts, when the latter apply.

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Other changes in longer-term strategic contexts that can affect projects

When I first started developing the organisational strategic framework shown in the upper section of Figure 2, I discussed deliberate and emergent strategies and the origins of projects in some detail (Stretton 2017k, 2017l). Booth 2018 has developed an associated but more detailed picture of what he calls drivers for developing strategic plans, as illustrated in Figure 9.
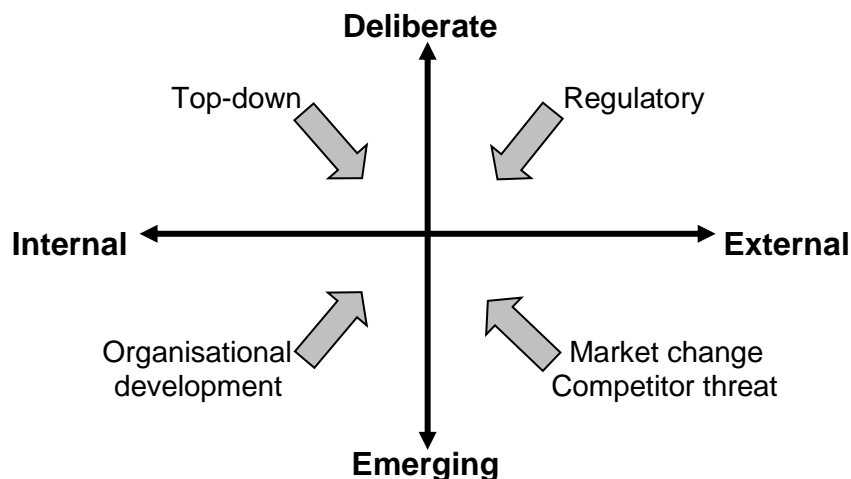
Figure 9: Drivers for developing a strategic plan – Adapted from Booth 2018, Figure 1

In particular, Booth is concerned with the need for organisations to develop more dynamic flexible approaches to strategy planning and implementation to deal effectively with what many have described as a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous). In Booth's words,

> The emphasis on rapid change has led to the adoption of a more dynamic approach to the development and implementation of strategy, with an emphasis on adaptability and organisational agility to react rapidly to changing circumstances or emerging opportunities.

Booth discusses the above various drivers for developing a strategic plan, and goes on to talk about what he describes as a 'strategic journey', and about handling deviations in realised strategy, effects of market change, newly emergent strategies, refreshing the strategic plan, etc. Referring to an illustrative example, he says,

> One very useful way of looking at this is to consider this as a series of changing contexts. There was one context when the organisation started its first strategic planning process; then there was a different context as gaps developed between this and what was happening. The market changing competitor innovation was a significant new context ….

This contribution appears to be a timely reminder that, these days, most projects operate in a VUCA world, which brings with it changing contexts, and corresponding needs for appropriate adaptation.

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SUMMARY

This first of the more detailed articles in this series has been concerned with projects in the context of organisational strategic management. This is a highly relevant context, because most projects, no matter how originated, are, or soon become, direct components of organisational strategic plans and their execution. I have certainly found it useful on many occasions to discuss projects in this context.

In this article we have gone a little further into the context of organisational strategic management, by looking at what one might call sub-contexts within this broader context, and how projects relate to these.

The first of these sub-contexts concerned the front end of strategic management, namely the initiation and development of the front ends of strategic initiatives and their component projects. In particular, we have been concerned with the potential for greater project management involvement in these activities. I have already addressed this issue in many earlier articles in this journal, the most recent being Stretton 2019c, 2019d. The basic message has been that all parties stand to benefit, many of them very considerably, by having project management involved earlier in these activities – and generally the earlier the better.

The second of these sub-contexts related to longer term asset and strategic life spans. Here I drew heavily on Giammalvo 2019, who discusses a particularly important type of organisational strategic initiative, namely organizational assets, and how projects relate to them. I related his depictions of asset life spans to our strategic management framework, and recognised that projects, and indeed programs, occupy only a small part of a total asset life span – and an organisational strategic life span – both of which are often of very long duration indeed.

One consequence of the above is that organisational strategic contexts will typically change over time in a VUCA world, and this will impact on the project component of strategic initiatives.

Even more relevant to this series of articles is Giammalvo's recommendation to stop positioning the Project Manager as the "star" in such contexts, but to recognise the PM as an important supporting actor. I believe that this exhortation is relevant to most contexts in which projects are undertaken. My perspective is that projects should always be recognised as being part of a means of helping achieve broader ends in whatever contexts they are undertaken. We will be looking further at a range of such contexts, and how projects relate to them, in the following articles of this series.

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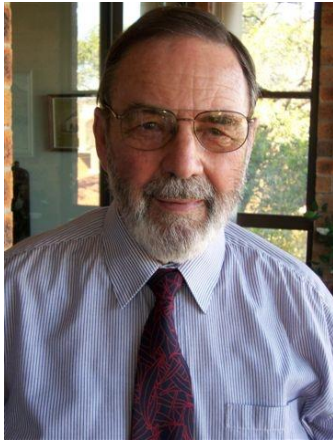
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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management 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.

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