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Featured Paper

*Project creatures that accelerate and enhance a portfolio of projects*
by Marisa Silva and Henny Portman

# Project creatures that accelerate and enhance a portfolio of projects [1]

## Marisa Silva and Henny Portman

## INTRODUCTION

As you might recall, last year we (Marisa Silva and Henny Portman) went on a safari to hunt the project creatures that could negatively impact a portfolio of projects [Silva, M. and Portman, H. (2019). Creatures that slow down portfolio delivery and how to kill them; PM World Journal, Vol. VIII, Issue IX, October.[2]]. While it was not as exciting as doing it in Kruger Park, we can fortunately say that it was also not as dangerous and we returned sound and safe despite all the white elephant projects, pet projects, and unicorn projects we encountered in the way!

Almost one year after that experience, portfolio management got us thinking again. If portfolios are always a mix of "good" and "bad" projects, those that are well planned and those that are included without any thorough rationale, some that are carefully studied and others that are pure opportunistic, could it be that there are also project creatures that could accelerate and enhance the success of a portfolio? The quest for project creatures continues!

In the animal kingdom there will be animals that are at the top of the system, the apex predators. Also, in your portfolio you will have projects who could play the role of apex predator. It is these predators who will consume your scares resources. To make sure you feed the right projects ('doing the right projects') you have to prioritize your projects and assign resources to those projects that enhance and accelerate the value delivery of your portfolio.

Assume you are a portfolio manager or PMO professional and overseeing your portfolio. Compare yourself with a falcon with super sharp eyes who can spot the right project, or do you want to be a seagull that appears from high, swoops in, eats all the projects, makes a lot of squawking, shits on everything and disappears as fast without even noticing if you captured the right ones.

Armed with our experience and the support of other "project hunters", we found a few. In this article, we present our findings, strategies to capitalise on such beautiful creatures, and why it is so important that at least some of them are in your portfolio of projects.

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[1] How to cite this paper: Portman, H. and Silva, M. (2020). Project creatures that accelerate and enhance a portfolio of projects; *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue IX, September.
[2] https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/pmwj86-Oct2019-Silva-Portman-creatures-that-slow-portfolio-delivery2.pdf

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## PROJECT CREATURES

Project creatures out there:

### 1.  Cheetah Project

*What is it?* A small project with a clear goal that could be achieved very fast. Just like cheetahs who are very slim and very fast to catch on their own or in very small groups their prey.

*How to capitalize?* As long as the goal is in line with the company's strategy you could handle these types of projects as low hanging fruit. They are not consuming a lot of resources, are small and can deliver results in a short timeframe. When it is simple and the goal is right there, you zoom to it to catch it quickly without any further complication. In fact, you eat an elephant one bite at a time and the same principle applies here – use the decomposition technique to break down your large elephant-projects into smaller but quicker, clearly defined pieces of work – cheetah projects.

### 2.  Lion Project

*What is it?* A lion project is a project where the sponsor is the king of the jungle. However, be aware that a lion project could be a pet project too. In that case you have to kill it.

*How to capitalize?* If the project is not a pet project you have a project with natural authority, unlimited sponsorship that could turn into an easy project! Don't be afraid to use it, providing that the project passed the test of prioritization and is indeed the right project to be done. You can build a lion project by finding it a vested sponsor, with skin in the game, and by clearly presenting its strategic importance to the organization.

### 3.  Ants Project

*What is it?* These types of projects are using a lot of resources. Like ant nests there is a lot of activity. Although it looks like all are just running around, there is madness to the structure. Every ant knows what to do and by combining forces, they are able to bring home a full lunch. These projects give the team members a lot of energy to deliver results.

*How to capitalize?* Ants projects tend to work well when the team is working on a tight deadline and recognizes the need to deliver on time – or consequences of not doing so, such as with regulatory/compliance-related projects. You can capitalize on such projects by introducing some level of pressure in the project (we know this might

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sound strange but have a read about antifragility and you'll get our point), for instance, by adding short sprints of work. Because these projects consume a lot of resources you have to make sure that the project categorizes as the 'right project' and you have to use your prioritization model to position it in your portfolio.

## 4. Eagle Project

*What is it?* The eagle project is well designed to ensure a clear line of sight between the organisation's strategic objectives and the project's benefits. These types of projects will definitely help the organization to increase the organizational energy to make it happen. With the eagle's clarity of vision, the organisation is on a winner.

*How to capitalize?* It's not uncommon for organizations to start projects without a clear view of the benefits they are going to deliver or how these will contribute to the strategic objectives. Even worse, sometimes the strategic objectives of the organization are just in the C-suite's heads rather than clearly defined and communicated to staff. For that reason, if you have an Eagle project, cherish it. If you don't, try to find yourself one: ensure that the strategic objectives are explicitly stated, that the project's benefits are identified and realistic, and draw your path through these by building a Benefits Map – if there is a clear line of sight between these two points, congrats my friend, you found your Eagle.

## 5. Bee Project

*What is it?* A bee project can be seen as a swarm of bees with a honeycomb and where different teams of bees know exactly what to do (e.g. nurse bees, working bees). A well-run bee project is the stellar example of the management of product delivery. The beehive shows exactly how work packages should be accepted, executed and delivered.

*How to capitalize?* These types of projects share with Ants projects the noticeable strong teamwork; however, they benefit from a structure that exists from the offset rather than being designed to respond to a deadline. Capacity and capability to deliver are two factors that should always be considered in any portfolio selection and prioritization model so the Bee project has got you covered as long as the project also categorizes as the 'right project' regarding other factors (e.g. risk, budget, alignment to strategic objectives). Bee projects run on pre-existing well-defined and well-embedded project management processes so you should invest enough time to build on your project management maturity to find as many Bee projects as possible later. You can also use these types of project to show the organization the impact of team behavior on product delivery.

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## 6. Dolphin project

***What is it?*** A Dolphin project is a project where the team members enjoy being part of the project. Like dolphins, the project makes short sprints (agile way of working) to jump out of the water to deliver an increment and see if something needs to be adjusted before diving into the water again. This approach also ensures that the project manager (or related role) remains on the surface of the project and visible and communicating with stakeholders, an important factor to build buy-in and continuously validate their expectations towards the project.

***How to capitalize?*** As long as the project categorizes as the 'right project' you have to use your prioritization model to position the project in your portfolio. You could use these types of project to show the organization that the delivery model used will help them to harvest benefits at the earliest moment possible and not waiting for the finalization of the complete project. Dolphin projects are an architype for Agile ways of working but not exclusively used in that form. In fact, you can always try to introduce Dolphin projects in your portfolio by ensuring that the governance is built in a way that allows for short dives, thus incremental delivery, but also better control, better communication, and more visibility.

## CONCLUSION

If you, as a portfolio manager or PMO practitioner, can enable the right environment where these creatures can flourish you could create a clean and healthy portfolio. You could use these examples to educate all involved to set up the 'right' projects. A clean and healthy portfolio is a lean portfolio with less projects, and where there are no duplications, where each project is contributing to the company's strategy and helps to achieve this strategy in the fastest possible way and with the right balance of risk. As a result, the productive organizational energy to deliver your portfolio and the chance for successful portfolio delivery will increase.

Having a clean and lean portfolio gives you the time to support your organization, to do projects in the right way and to get them done well. And if the projects are done well you can start harvesting and getting the business benefits. We wish you a lot of success with your project creature hunting and breeding activities!

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**Henny Portman** is partner of HWP Consulting. He has 40 years of experience in the project management domain. He was the thought leader within NN Group of the PMO domain and responsible for the introduction and application of the PMO methodologies (portfolio, programme and project management) across Europe and Asia. He trains, coaches and directs (senior) programme, project and portfolio managers and project sponsors and built several professional (PM(O) communities. He is an accredited P3O, PRINCE2, MSP, MoP, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM, AgilePgM and AgileSHIFT trainer and a SPC4 SAFe consultant and trainer too. He is a P3M3 trainer and assessor and PMO Value Ring Certified Consultant. On behalf of IPMA, he assesses mega and large projects for the IPMA Project Excellence Award. In addition, Henny is international speaker and author of many articles and books in the PM(O) field and blogger (hennyportman.wordpress.com). Henny can be contacted at henny.portman@planet.nl.

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**Marisa Silva, the Lucky PM**, is a PMO and PPM advisor, trainer, and international speaker, with a track record of building capabilities in complex organizations undergoing transformational change. A passionate advocate of the value of PMOs and project management, Marisa is the Chief Community Officer at the PMO Global Alliance, author of "Bedtime Stories for Project Managers", and a Senior Consultant at Wellingtone, a leading project management consulting firm dedicated to enable step change in organizational PPM maturity. Highly committed to the project management community, she was Programs Director at Project Managers Without Borders, Secretary of the APM PMO SIG, Head of External Affairs at IPMA Young Crew Portugal and the co-creator of ground-breaking training courses in the industry (PMO

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Practitioner, PMO Leader, and Assurance Practitioner). In 2019 she became one of the youngest Fellow members of the APM, in recognition of her contribution to the profession and in 2020 she was awarded the distinction of Young Project Manager of the Year by the APOGEP/IPMA Young Crew Portugal. Marisa can be contacted at marisa.silva@wellingtone.co.uk.