

Some expanded perspectives on project management involvement in the “fuzzy front ends” of projects¹

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

This article has been prompted by a recent contribution to this journal by Kerzner & Zeitoun 2022, entitled “The reinvention of the project manager”. One of the key issues raised by the authors was that companies are moving towards involving project managers in what they describe as the Fuzzy Front End (FFE), which is concerned with the initial selection and prioritisation of projects – rather than leaving these activities entirely to senior management.

Now, the position is that, for a very long time, there have been substantial, and sometimes rather prominent, examples of various types of involvement by project-related management in FFE and associated processes. However, these do not appear to be as widely recognised as one might reasonably have expected. I have discussed many of these examples in previous articles in this journal. In this article I propose to include an update and consolidation of these – i.e. a reasonably comprehensive summary of examples I know of in relation to past and present involvements by project-related management in FFE and associated processes.

Some of these involvements have been in the form of services provided by certain project-based organisations, whilst others have been undertaken internally within some production-based ones. I will define/describe these two different types of organisations which undertake projects (as I have done in many past articles in this journal, most recently in Stretton 2022j) as follows.

- **Production-based Organizations** (Cooke-Davies 2002), derive most (if not all) of their revenue and/or benefits from producing and selling products and services. They utilize projects to create new, or improve existing, products and services; enter new markets; or otherwise improve or change their organizations (Archibald et al 2012).
- **Project-based Organizations** (Cooke-Davies 2002) derive most (if not all) of their revenue and/or other benefits from creating and delivering projects/ programs to external customers (Archibald et al 2012).

In the following I will introduce and discuss the above within the somewhat broader framework of organisational strategic management at large. These discussions cover many illustrative examples which could be used to help accelerate the involvement of project management in FFE and related organisational strategic planning processes.

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PROJECTS IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Project aligned with organisational strategic objectives

Today, there exists a line-of-sight between project teams and senior management to make sure that all projects are aligned to strategic management objectives. Kerzner & Zeitoun 2022

This quotation is a positive update of the many past admonitions in the project management literature to make sure that all projects are aligned to strategic management objectives.

In Stretton 2017k I noted that writers on project management tend to discuss how projects are initiated in two different contexts – the first in the context of organisational strategic business planning (“*deliberate*”), and the second in basically ad hoc contexts, via an idea, or perceived opportunity, or similar (“*emergent*”). The latter appears to reflect the context of the above quotation.

However, via an organizational strategy continuum proposed by Mintzberg & Waters 1985, I was able to draw these two different contexts together (see “*deliberate and emergent strategic objectives*” in Stage 1 of Figure 1 below), in a format which was eventually developed to a full five-stage basic organisational strategic management framework (in Stretton 2018l). An updated version of this framework is now presented and briefly discussed.

A basic organisational strategic management framework

A BASIC ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK				
1. Establish/ re- establish org. strategic objectives	2. Develop strategic initiative options, evaluate, choose best	3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve organisational strategic objectives.
Establish and shape both deliberate and emergent strategic objectives; Confirm desired outcomes/ benefits	Develop alternative strategic initiatives to achieve strategic outcomes / benefits; Evaluate alternatives; Choose the best	Elaborate and define chosen strategic initiatives/projects; Confirm feasibilities; Prioritise and consolidate	Execute strategic initiative component projects/programs and other strategic work	Achieve strategic outcomes and realise benefits

Figure 1. A basic linear organisational strategic management framework

As I discussed in Stretton 2018d, there is no universal “standard” set of processes for organisational strategic management. However, judging from feedback (and lack of it) for over five years, the above framework appears to be reasonably representative.

Strategic initiatives and component projects/programs

It is also noted here that I have elected to focus on *strategic initiatives* rather than on their component *projects or programs*. This is because there is always some *other strategic work* accompanying projects/programs – often very important work – and I have been at some pains to ensure that this work is included under the *strategic initiative* descriptor, which Cooke-Davies 2016:259 has described as follows.

[A strategic initiative is] ‘a project, portfolio of projects, other discrete programme or series of actions undertaken to implement or continue the execution of a strategy, or that is otherwise essential for the successful implementation or execution of a strategy’.

For those who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with projects/programs being presented as components of the more generalised strategic initiatives, I have represented the former separately, as follows.

Representing how projects/programs relate to organisational strategic mgt.

A BASIC ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK				
1. Establish/ re- establish org. strategic objectives	2. Develop strategic initiative options, evaluate, choose best	3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve organisational strategic objectives.
Establish and shape both deliberate and emergent strategic objectives; Confirm desired outcomes/ benefits	Develop alternative strategic initiatives to achieve strategic outcomes / benefits; Evaluate alternatives; Choose the best	Elaborate and define chosen strategic initiatives/projects; Confirm feasibilities; Prioritise and consolidate	Execute strategic initiative component projects/programs and other strategic work	Achieve strategic outcomes and realise benefits
PROJECT COMPONENT OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES	Alternative strategic initiatives include component projects Best choices originate projects	Includes definition and feasibility of component projects/programs	Plan, execute and deliver projects/programs	
PLC – PROJECT LIFE-CYCLE PHASES	“FFE”	Project Development Phases	Project Execution/ Delivery Phases	

Figure 2. Representing projects and PLCs separately in the org. strategic management context

In similar vein to organisational strategic management, there is no “standard” project life cycle (PLC). In the above I have generalised the latter into two broad sets of phases, described as *project development*, and *project execution/delivery*. I have also attempted to provide for iterative processes which are so frequently involved in these processes with a double headed arrow, as shown.

In presenting projects in this context, we are, in effect, adopting the organisation as the basic context in which projects are undertaken – or, as Morris 2013L281 describes it,

...where the organisation is the unit of analysis,

Of course, the organisation itself is a component of broader contexts, including the industries it is part of, and the broader environments of those industries – as I discussed most recently in Stretton 2022i.

However, the organisation remains the most immediate of the contexts in which projects are undertaken, with the strongest possible connection between projects and the organisation’s strategic management processes, as depicted by Kerzner & Zeitoun above, and by so many others in the broader project management literature.

Before focusing in on the “fuzzy front end” in particular, we will first look at different perspectives which have been offered on the range and scope of project “front ends” at large.

VARYING SCOPE OF “FRONT END” INVOLVEMENT BY PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Companies are now rethinking when to bring project managers on board the project. Project selection and prioritization are referred to as the FFE [Fuzzy Front End] ... In the future, we can expect project managers to be brought on board during the FFE ... Kerzner & Zeitoun 2022

Increasing front end involvement by project managers is a topic which has been discussed very frequently in the project management literature. One of the more prominent of these has been Peter Morris’ “Management of Projects (MOP)”, a term he uses to include management of the “front end”:

The Management of Projects is as concerned with managing the front-end as with down-stream execution. (Morris 2013:235)

However, as Morris 2013:164 has pointed out, there are different perceptions of, or ways of defining, the extent of project front-ends.

Different perceptions of the extent of project front ends

In the following figure, I have appended part of Figure 11.1 from Morris 2013:164 immediately under the basic organisational strategic management framework and appended a representation of three types of front-end (labelled here as A, B, C) which he describes in a note appended to his figure.

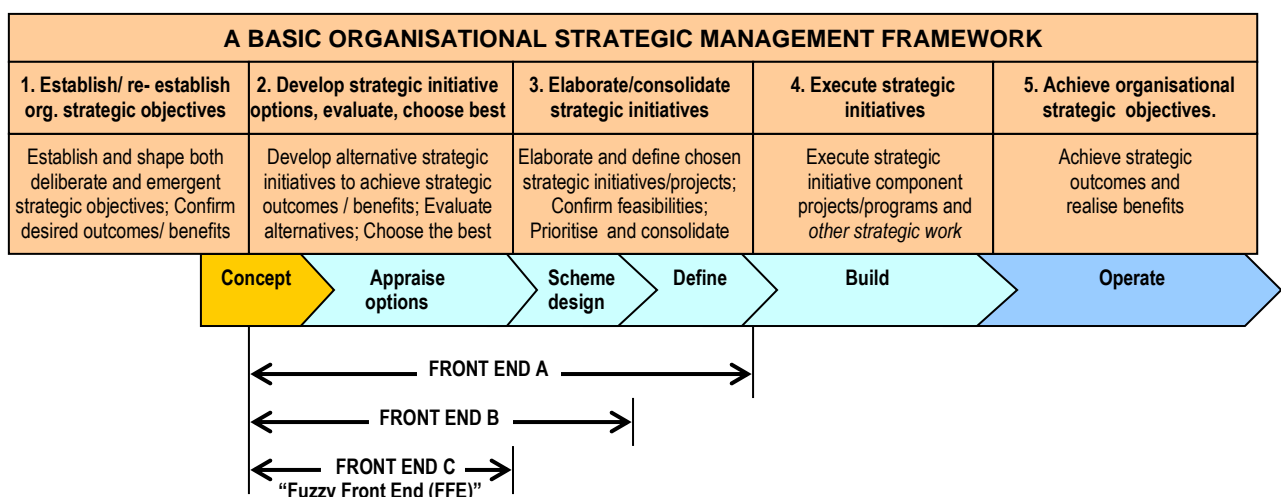


Figure 3: Representing three possible extents of project “front ends”

Clearly, Front End C represents what Kerzner & Zeitoun have described as the Fuzzy Front End (FFE), as indicated in Figure 3. However, before going on to discuss project management involvement in the latter, I thought it might be useful to relate each of these three types of project front ends more directly with the two broad groups of project life cycle phases in Figure 2 above.

• **Front End A is associated directly with execution/delivery-only projects**

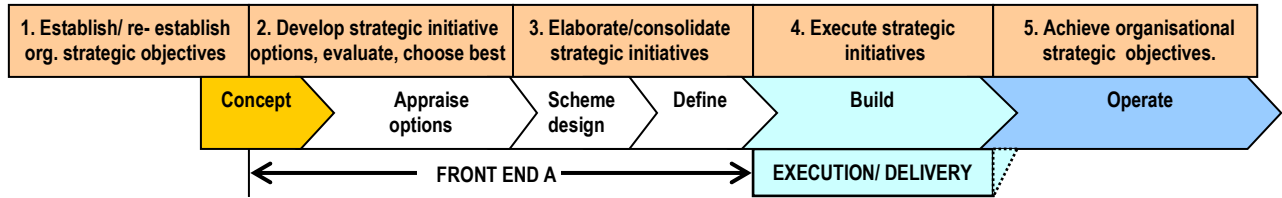


Figure 4. Representing the association of Front End A with execution/delivery-only projects

Front End A, which is the “longest” of Morris’ three ways of defining front ends, is directly associated with execution/delivery-only projects, as indicated above. Although I have seen no verifying data, I believe that execution/delivery-only projects still appear to be the most common way in which projects are undertaken in practice, at least in terms of gross monetary value. So, Morris’ Front End A remains a prominent type of project front end.

However, project managers who manage execution/delivery projects are normally too remote from these to become involved in the earlier FFE component of Front End A.

• **Front End B and partial project development + execution/delivery projects**

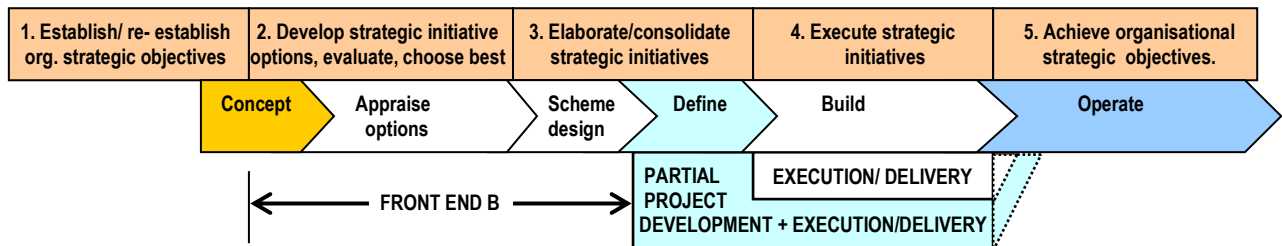


Figure 5. Front End B and partial project development + execution/delivery projects

I have taken Morris’ *Scheme design* and *define* as examples of types of activities that can be involved in what we identified as *Project development phases* of the project life cycle, which I have adopted as the more generalised descriptor. In practice, it appears that handover to project management in production-based organisations can take place at quite varying stages of Project development, and have therefore described this in generalised terms as *Partial project development + Execution/delivery*, and have represented Front End B accordingly.

Although project managers in this configuration are closer to the FFE component of this type of front end, they are not particularly well placed to be considered for involvement in the latter.

• **Front End C (“FFE”) and full project development + execution/delivery projects**

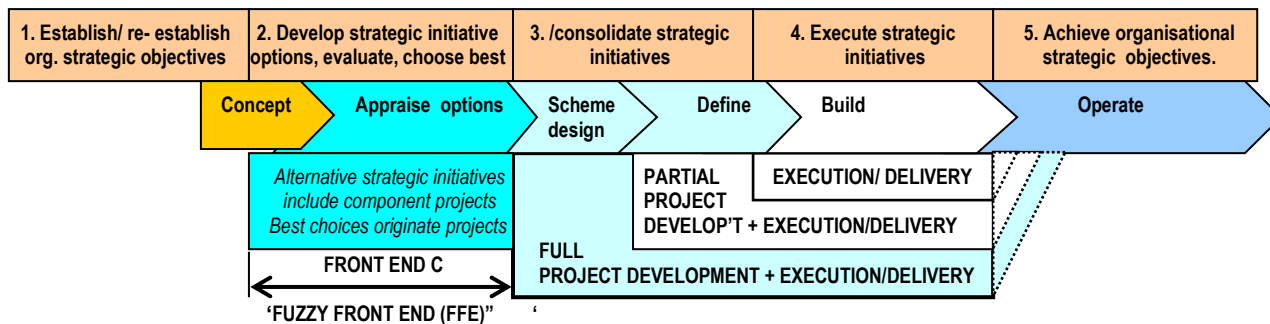


Figure 6. Representing Front End C (FFE) & full project development + execution/delivery projects

In this configuration, the project manager is well placed to be included in FFE activities. Whilst it is heartening to see Kerzner & Zeitoun’s notes about the emergence of increasing involvement of project management in such FFE activities in production-based organisations, it may seem rather surprising that it is still nowhere near being common practice. I say surprising because there have been substantial instances of such involvement for a very long time now, in the forms of both external project-based services, and in-house portfolio-based and program-based initiatives.

We will now look at these various types of project-related involvement in more detail.

EXAMPLES OF “FUZZY FRONT END (FFE)” PROJECT MGT. INVOLVEMENT

SOME EXISTING EXTERNAL PROJECT-BASED SERVICES IN THE FFE DOMAIN

Some substantial existing external project-based services in FFE

Many project-based organisations have been providing front-end services in the FFE domain for over seventy years. Perhaps the most prominent of these have been Front End Loading (FEL) services by Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) organisations in major contract domains. But, in spite of the fact that these services have been provided for so many decades, they are rarely mentioned in the mainstream project management literature.

“Front-End Loading” is described by Morris 2013:60 in a footnote as follows.

IPA, the oil, gas and minerals project benchmarking company, coined the useful term ‘Front-End Loading’: “Front-End Loading (Business FEL) is a tool for determining which is the “right” project to meet the demands of business.

I have written about FEL services in several articles in this journal, most recently in Stretton 2022a. The above quotation summarises the nature of FEL very well, and I will not go into further detail here.

Another is exemplified by Civil & Civic’s Client Needs Determination (CND) service, which originated in the 1960s, and which I have frequently discussed in this journal – most recently in Stretton 2022k, which was entitled “From customer needs to project requirements: Helping customers/users clarify and confirm their basic business or equivalent needs, before specifying the project/ product requirements to best help satisfy these needs”.

In the context of the basic organisational strategic management framework, I have described these more broadly as “External strategic initiative support services”, and represent them as shown in Figure 7 (in which I have also provided for external project development + execution/delivery services, and execution/delivery-only services).

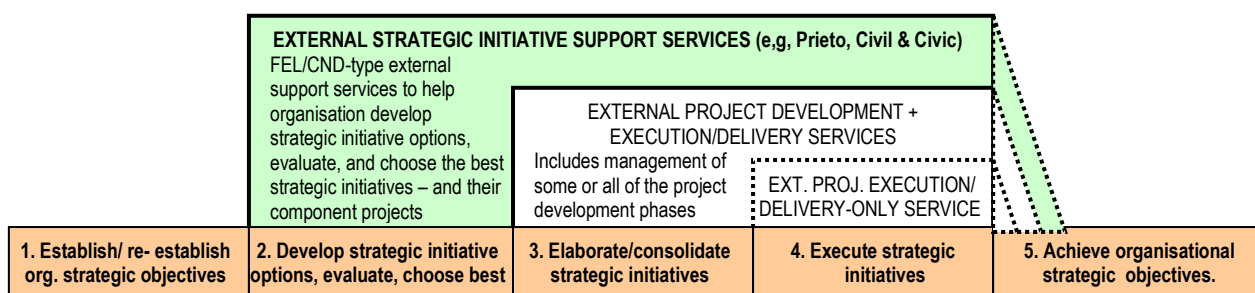


Figure 7. Representing FEL/CND-type external strategic initiative support services to FFE Stage 2

Additional existing external project-based services in pre-FFE strategic planning

- **Studies to help shape organisation’s strategic undertaking**

In Archibald et al 2012, Prieto notes that,

In today’s large capital projects, the FEL phases ... are preceded by an extensive “Conception” period during which extensive and often time-consuming activities are undertaken. In some instances, these may be synonymous with FEL 1 but in other instances they will include pre-FEL efforts often referred to as “studies”. These activities typically include: a) Computer models, b) Conceptual level estimates, c) Environmental studies, d) Feasibility studies, e) Labor and wage studies, f) Master plans, g) Permitting, h) Project financing, i) Scope definition, j) Siting, k) Technology/ licensor selection, l) O&M readiness reviews.

Dalcher 2016b introduces the useful descriptor *shaping* broadly in the above context, and highlights its importance as follows.

[Mullaly 2016]...highlights the importance of *shaping*, or sponsoring organisational undertakings and [finding] the balance between process, politics and agency in the initial shaping of new undertakings.

• **Helping to establish organisation’s Strategic Business Objectives (SBOs)**

Prieto 2009 discusses the engagement of EPC firms to help organisations establish their strategic business objectives (SBOs) as being a type of partnership arrangement.

Most importantly, the owner requires a partner that can help it translate its programmatic vision and broad objectives into a well-defined set of specific business objectives that underpin an actionable and implementable strategic plan for the “giga” program.

However, such services have not been confined to very large enterprises and undertakings. At quite a different order of magnitude, Civil & Civic sometimes went beyond involvement in Stage 2 to help the client establish/re-establish its organisational strategic objectives. An early example of this comes from Clark 2002:93, who describes Civil & Civic’s involvement in helping a client in the educational sector establish its strategic objectives, supported by structured financial and business plans to achieve them, as follows.

....within a year the Sisters at Loreto Convent, Kirribilli, guided by Dusseldorp [Civil & Civic’s CEO] and his team, had come up with an integrated business plan for the school’s complete rebuilding and expansion – supported by the first structured financial plan in the Catholic education sector –

I have included both the above types of additional existing external project-based services in pre-FFE strategic planning under the heading “External strategic planning support services” in the following representation, which adds the latter to Figure 7.

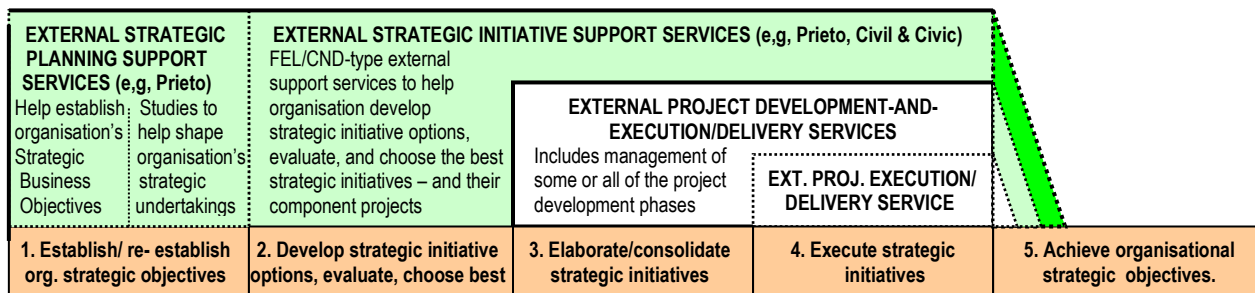


Figure 8. Adding external strategic planning support services to Figure 7

The rather obvious reasons for including these pre-FFE services are that they have been in existence for a long time; they directly complement the direct FFE services; but they have received even less space than the latter in the project management literature.

We will further discuss the broader scant recognition of the existence of these types of project related FFE and pre-FFE services, both within the project management community at large, and by others such as senior executives in organisations, in a later section on “Influencing senior executives; views of project management. But, at this stage, we move on to discuss some existing arrangements for PM-related involvement in FFE which have been undertaken in-house, within certain organisations.

SOME EXISTING IN-HOUSE EXAMPLES OF PM-RELATED INVOLVEMENT IN FFE

Portfolios, programs, and the organisational strategic management framework

In this major section I will be discussing long-existing project management-related in-house involvements in the Fuzzy Front End (FFE) sector by certain types of project portfolios, which I will identify as *strategic investment portfolios*, and by a certain type of program, which I will label a *strategic investment program*. Both portfolios and programs have been given a variety of different meanings in the project management literature, and I will briefly discuss these in the context of each of the above.

I start by representing portfolios and programs in the context of the basic organisational strategic management framework. Figure 2-3 in the 7th Edition of PMI’s Standard for Project Management (PMI 2021) represents portfolios and programs in a format which matches well with the strategic management framework, as shown in Figure 9. This also provides a convenient basic framework to illustrate some of the following discussions.

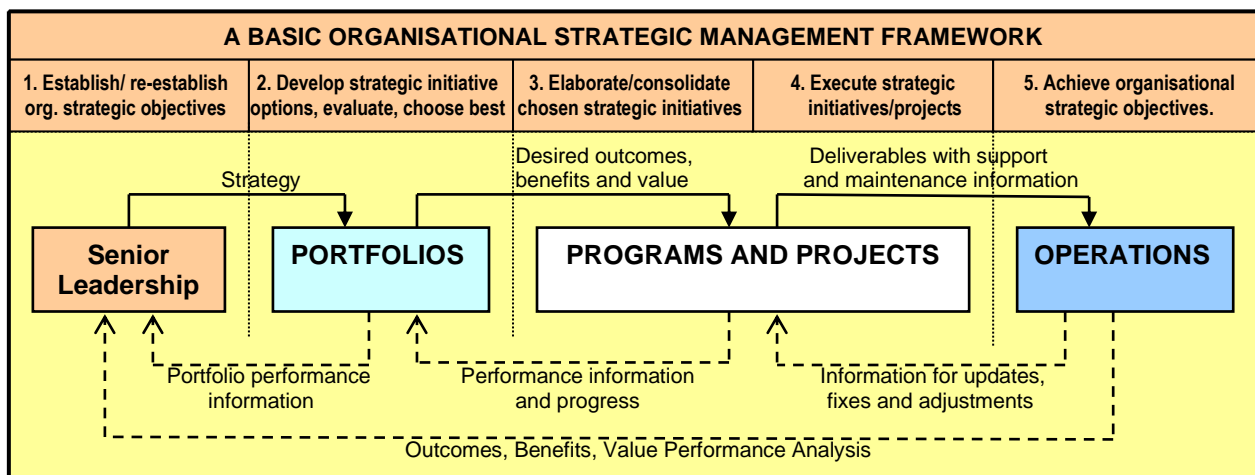


Figure 9: Linking PMI 2021 Figure 2-3 with corresponding organisational strategic mgt. stages

• **Strategic investment portfolios and FFE**

We will start with portfolios, which, in the way they are presented in Figure 9, are clearly identifiable as what I have described as *strategic investment portfolios*. But, first, a short discussion about varying uses of the descriptor *portfolio* in the literature.

There are many types and varieties of portfolio management. (PMI 2006b:5).

In Stretton 2021j I gave examples of four definitions of *portfolio*, or *project portfolio*, from the project management literature, which basically describe them as collections of projects, programs and other work at large, which are managed concurrently in a coordinated way to deliver synergistic benefits. This is a common broader understanding of the nature of what I will call *project portfolios*.

However, another group of definitions are a good deal more specific and include the role of portfolio management in the project selection and prioritization processes associated with Stage 2 of the organisational strategic management framework. For example, Cabanis-Brewin & Pennypacker 2014 say,

One goal of [strategic investment] portfolio management is to maximize the value of the portfolio by careful examination of candidate projects for inclusion in the portfolio and the timely exclusion of projects not meeting the portfolio’s strategic objectives.

Dalcher 2020 also discusses strategic investment portfolios in some detail, and observes that

[Strategic Investment] Portfolios enable a greater focus on strategic aspects, outcomes, benefits and values. Indeed, portfolios can be effectively positioned as the connecting layer between business strategy and project execution, providing the flexibility, visibility and authority needed to translate policy and strategy in informed, effective execution.

This positioning is reflected in Figure 9 above.

However, the scope of *strategic investment portfolio management* goes well beyond project selection and prioritisation projects. Kendall 2014 adds a further three responsibilities after *authorisation*, which extends his understanding of portfolio management responsibilities well into the *strategy execution* zone, as follows.

Project [Strategic Investment] Portfolio Management (PPM) is a set of processes to analyse, recommend, authorize, activate, accelerate, and monitor projects to meet organizational improvement goals.

Smit 2017 is somewhat more expansive.

[Strategic Investment] Portfolio management is a systematic and continuous decision-making process by which an organisation evaluates, selects, and prioritises the work that is of most value taking into consideration the allocation of scarce resources (financial, physical, human, technological) to best accomplish organisational objectives and strategies ...

Business cases are used as the basis for evaluating, selecting, prioritising and approving portfolio components (programmes, projects and other work)

Smit 2017 goes on to list the following elements and activities under the heading *Portfolio delivery*: *Activate portfolio components; Manage portfolio changes; Manage portfolio performance and benefits; Manage portfolio finances; Manage portfolio resources; Manage portfolio stakeholders and communications; Manage portfolio risks; Provide portfolio oversight (i.e. management control); Report portfolio performance.*

This extended range of strategic portfolio management is reflected in Figure 10 below, representing it in the context of the basic organisational strategic management model.

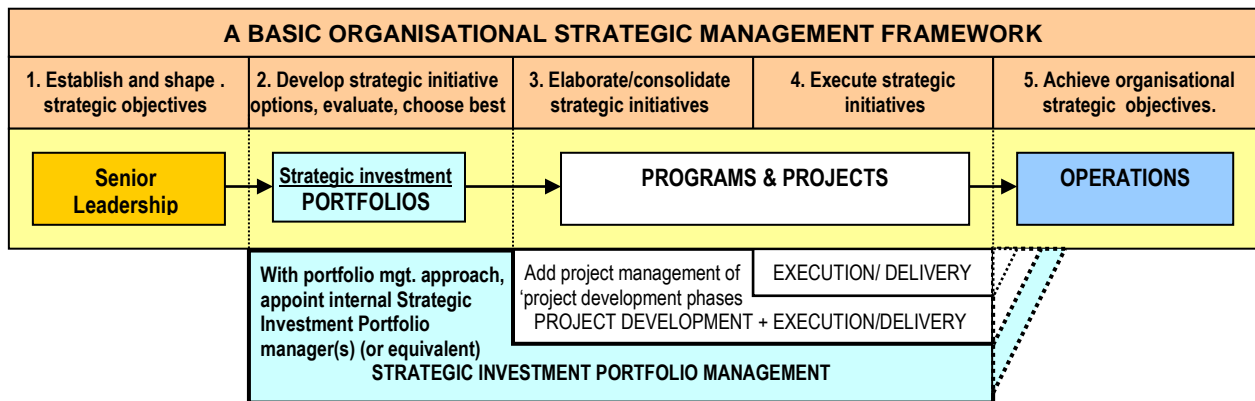


Figure 10. Representing strategic investment portfolio management in the context of the basic organisational strategic management framework

It should be emphasised here that only some organisations adopt formal strategic investment management approaches. However, the point here is that many have done so, and there is therefore a long-standing precedent for in-company project management to extend the range of its involvement into FFE activities. However, it is a substantial extension of project-related capabilities, and, as Dalcher 2020 expressed it,

[Strategic Investment] Portfolios offer an established way of organising, prioritising and delivering streams of work according to strategic intent. Effective development and management of portfolios demands strategic awareness, new skills and different mindsets that transcend beyond traditional project mindsets. Effective portfolio implementation requires a change of perspective from thinking in project terms, to thinking about the organisation and value.

We will be discussing these issues further in a following section on “The need for project managers to acquire new skills”. In the meantime, we move on to discuss existing involvement by one type of program in FFE activities.

• **Strategic initiative programs and FFE**

As was the case with project portfolios, we also have many different interpretations in the literature about the nature and scope of programs. As Pellegrinelli 2008:3 put it,

When individuals involved in projects and programmes meet, they each spend time trying to understand what the other means by programme management.

In Stretton 2021j I gave examples of four definitions of *program/program management* from the project management literature. These happen to be quite similar to the definitions of portfolios in that article, and basically describe programs as groups of related projects and other associated work, which are managed concurrently in a coordinated way to achieve beneficial strategic objectives. This is a common broader understanding of the nature of what I will call *implementation programs*.

These types of programs do not include any involvement in FFE processes. However, there is another type of program which does appear to have such involvement. This type of program is discussed in detail in the UK’s “Managing Successful Programmes - MSP” (e.g. OGC 2007), which are widely used guidelines for procurement and acquisition processes of public sector organisations in the UK.

At this point I should confess that I have had some difficulties in interpreting some of the materials in MSP. I have had absolutely no direct experience in the domains most immediately relevant to these guidelines, and therefore no practical background (of the kind I have had with project-based organisations) to help better interpret these apparent difficulties. So, some of the following interpretations may not be as well informed as I would like them to be.

We start with the following quotation from OGC 2007:6, and with an adaptation of its associated Figure 1.2 Programme management environment, as shown in Figure 11.

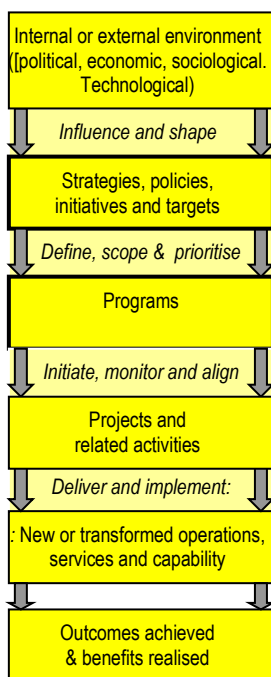


Figure 11. Adapted from OGC 2007, Figure 1.2

The organisation’s corporate strategies, initiatives and policies are influenced and shaped from both the internal and external environment. Programmes are then defined, scoped and prioritised to implement and deliver the outcomes required. Programmes in turn initiate, monitor and align the projects and related activities that are needed to create new products or service capabilities or to effect changes in business operations.

The elements of Figure 11 which are directly related to FFE are reproduced in horizontal format and aligned with the corresponding stages of the basic organisational strategic management framework, as shown in Figure 12.



Figure 12. Aligning FFE-related components of Figure 11 with corresponding stages of the strategic mgt. framework

Whilst Figure 11 and its associated quotation do not mention a strategic investment portfolio facility (nor does most of the main body of MSP, OGC 2007:220, Appendix B, introduces a *Portfolio, Programme and Project Management Maturity Model (P3M3)*:

This model identifies five levels of maturity that an organisation passes through as it seeks to achieve and then improve on best practice. It addresses the maturity of an organisation in its ability to manage portfolios, programmes and projects from a process perspective.

In its accompanying Table B.1, the section on portfolios moves from questioning if the organisation’s board has an informal list of its programs and projects at Level 1, through the actual existence of a portfolio at Level 2, through active portfolio management process at Level 3, through added management metrics and the like for portfolios at Level 4, to continuous portfolio management improvement processes at Level 5. The above figure from MSP specifically covers the lower P3M3 levels, where the organisation does not include an effective strategic investment portfolio management facility which would undertake the FFE work, as discussed earlier. So, the question is who does the Stage 2 work of *defining, scoping and prioritising* the strategic initiatives which comprise the ensuing programs, and what is the nature of this work?

I don’t know the answers to these questions. However, in the absence of such portfolio capabilities, it would be reasonable to suggest that program management itself would often be called upon to be involved in the FFE work.

Whether engaged this early in Stage 2 FFE processes or engaged after strategic investment portfolio processes have determined what strategic initiatives will be undertaken, I have designated such managers as strategic initiative program managers, to distinguish them from what I described as implementation programs, as discussed earlier. I have tentatively represented the involvement of strategic initiative management in the overall organisational strategic management context as follows.

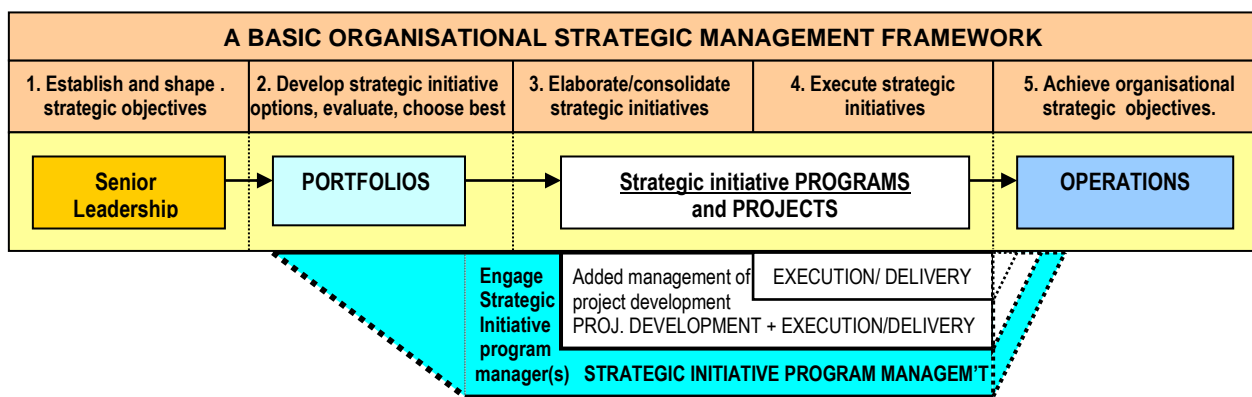


Figure 13. Representing roles of strategic initiation program managers in the strategic mgt. framework

At this stage, we should note that it is perhaps not all that often that strategic initiative program managers are actively involved in FFE activities.

I have not referred to Agile-type projects to date, but there appears to be some common ground with strategic initiative programs regarding when they are initiated. In the Agile-type projects in which I was engaged, the choice of which project(s) would be undertaken had already been made. I do not know if Agile project managers are ever actively involved in FFE activities. However, as with strategic initiative program management, it would appear realistic to make some provision for such involvement, in a similar fashion to that indicated by the left-hand dashed line in Figure 13 above.

Combining strategic investment portfolios and strategic initiative programs

We can also represent the situation where there is both strategic investment portfolio management and then appointed strategic initiative program management, as shown in Figure 14.

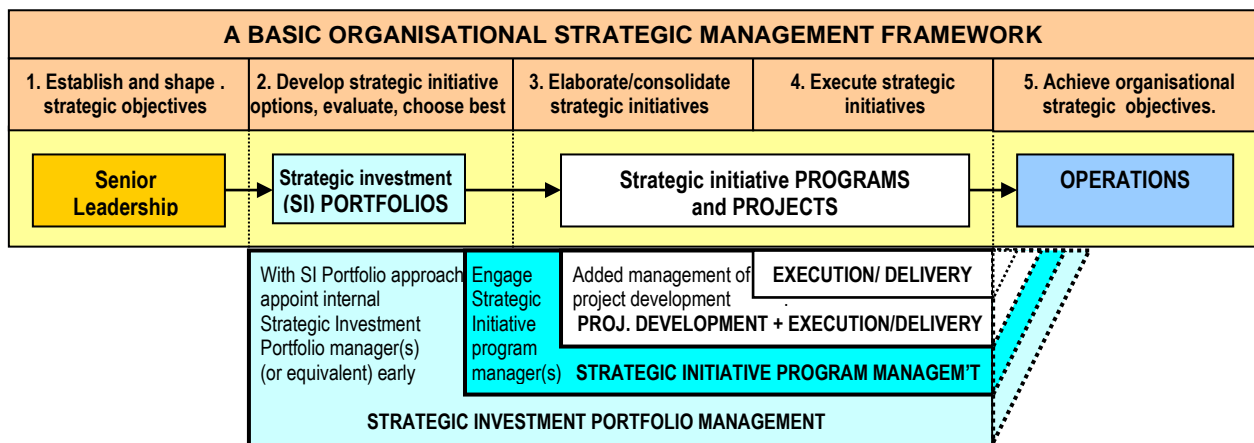


Figure 15. Combining strategic investment portfolios and strategic initiative programs in the context of the basic organisational strategic management framework

CUMULATING EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL PM-RELATED INVOLVEMENT IN FFE

Cumulative representation of both external & in-house PM-related involvement

We have shown a multitude of ways in which project-related management has been contributing – and contributing for a very long time in many cases – to project selection and prioritization in the Fuzzy Front End (FFE) of the Project Life Cycle. These have included both external project-related services, and in-house involvement initiatives.

FFE has been represented as a component of the broader Stage 2 of the basic organisational strategic management framework, which is the fundamental model we have been using to present these project-related materials in broader contexts. The rationale for using an organisational strategic model is implied in the following comment by Dalcher 2017.

The traditional bodies of knowledge in project management have little to say about organisational strategy. This is somewhat surprising given that the organisational appetite for projects is on the increase.

With regard to increasing project-related involvement in FFE, we have shown that the scale of past and existing involvement is already very substantial indeed. Yet, this also gets little if any mention in traditional bodies of knowledge, and appears not to be widely known about, or acknowledged, within the project management community itself. This would appear to be a significant constraint in any push for wider project-related involvement in FFE and pre-FFE activities.

We conclude this major section by combining Figures 8 and 15 above to represent an accumulation of all the existing types of external and internal PM-related involvement in FFE discussed to date.

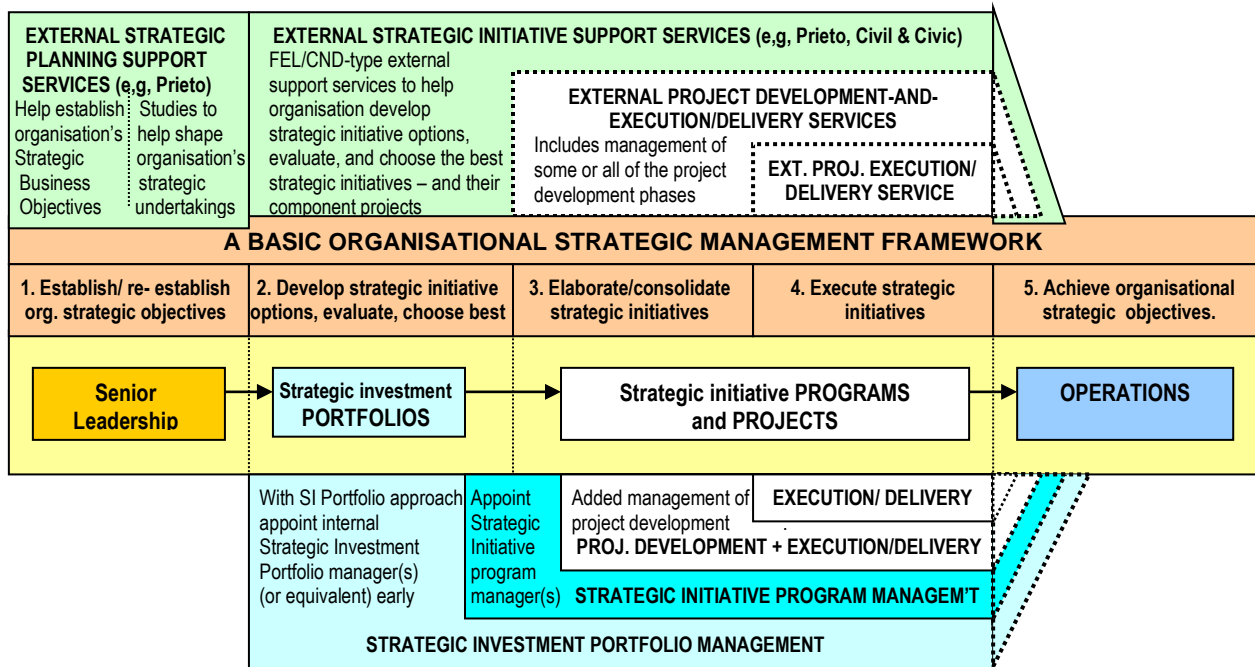


Figure 16. Representing cumulated existing external and internal PM-related involvement in FFE

There are abundant examples to help accelerate PM-related involvement in FFE

There appear to be more than enough materials in the above discussions to help convince most senior executives of the merits of more FFE involvement by project management. The earlier quotation from Kerzner & Zeitoun said that companies are now rethinking when to bring project managers on board, and that we can expect this will be increasingly during the FFE. However, in the light of the above discussions, it is perhaps surprising that this is not already in place in most organisations. However, Kerzner & Zeitoun themselves have pointed to an important factor which is limiting this evolution, as indicated in the following quotation.

One of the biggest mistakes executives make is limiting their views of what project managers are capable of achieving for their organizations strategically. The traditional tactical view of projects’ value has shifted to strategic value

Hopefully, making senior executives aware of the abundance of examples discussed above may help accelerate the involvement of project management in FFE (and also pre-FFE) organisational strategic processes.

However, relevant project managers will need to have acquired the requisite skills to contribute significantly to these processes, and be able to demonstrate that they do, indeed, add appropriate value to these organisational strategic planning processes.

ACQUISITION OF RELEVANT NEW SKILLS BY PROJECT MANAGERS

The changing role of the project manager, with a heavy focus on business strategy, is forcing project managers to learn many new skills, especially business-related skills.

Kerzner & Zeitoun 2022

This quotation nominates two particular areas in which project managers will need to acquire new skills – the area of business strategy, and the broader area of business-related skills at large. We will discuss each in turn.

Project managers acquiring strategic management skills

Kerzner & Zeitoun are far from being the only authors to point to the increasing importance of strategic management in the project context. For example, Dalcher 2016c says, “Projects link to, emerge from, and pertain to organisational strategies and plans”.

The lack of attention given to this in many mainstream project management publications was expressed by Dalcher 2017 as follows (repeating an earlier quotation).

The traditional bodies of knowledge in project management have little to say about organisational strategy. This is somewhat surprising given that the organisational appetite for projects is on the increase.

Yet, organisational strategic planning has featured strongly in many of the project-related services discussed in this article. In the earlier section on *Additional existing external project-based services in pre-FFE strategic planning*, we discussed how some EPC organisations helped customers establish their organisation’s Strategic Business Objectives (SBOs), and/or were involved in studies to help shape the organisation’s strategic undertakings.

The EPC people who undertake this work obviously need to have substantial organisational strategic know-how. At first sight, acquisition of such additional skills might seem rather a “long stretch” for a project manager. And, indeed, some project managers would not be predisposed to undertake such learning processes. However, there are many who have taken this route, including myself.

By an accident of history, in 1965 I became secretary of the Lend Lease Group Development Committee – its strategic planning group comprising its four most senior CEOs. As the group’s workhorse, I found myself on a steep learning curve, which continued throughout my seven-year tenure in that part-time role. This was both a challenging and rewarding part of a long and varied career.

In summary, there is plenty of precedent for project managers acquiring strategic skills, and no reason for them not to do so if they want to, or need to.

Project managers acquiring business management skills

In addition to the leading quotation above, Kerzner & Zeitoun said,

On strategic projects, business decision-making is becoming a project management responsibility.

This was relatively commonplace in my time working in project-based organisations, particularly with Civil & Civic. As R.G. Robinson, CEO of Civil & Civic for many years, put it (as quoted in Murphy 1984:69),

“We established a principle of attempting to make people responsible for the work they were given to do. For example, we regarded a site [project] manager, putting up a building, as being the manager of a business. He was given certain targets, and he had to run it as a business”.

I am not in a position from personal experience to assess how well this project-based organisational arrangement would translate into production-based organisations – but if ,Kerzner & Zeitoun are right, it is already well under way.

The Talent Triangle

The desirability of emerging project managers acquiring skills in strategic and business management was highlighted some time ago in an article by Naughton 2013 in this journal. He reported that, in 2012, the PMI CEO, Mark Langley, outlined and described the three major skill sets that tomorrow’s project leader will need to possess – namely Technical project management skills, Leadership skills, and Strategic and business management skills, which he called the Talent Triangle.

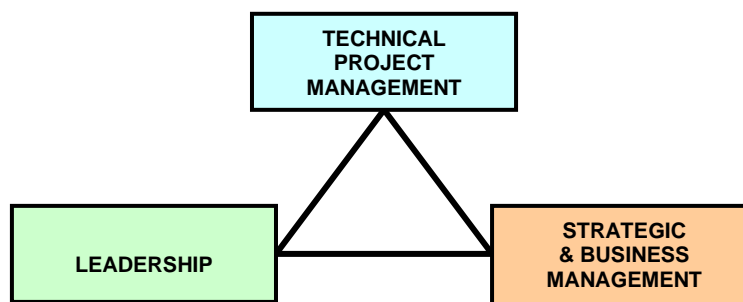


Figure 17: The Langley / Naughton Talent Triangle – adapted from Naughton 2013

So, it has been quite widely recognised that additional strategic management skills are directly relevant for potentially increasing project management involvement in organizational strategic planning processes. Indeed, the latter could be seen as a component of more generalised business management skills, which were very important in the project-based Civil & Civic and are evidently being increasingly recognised as such in production-based organisations.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

This article was prompted by a recent comment by Kerzner & Zeitoun which indicated that production-based companies are moving towards involving project managers in what they describe as the Fuzzy Front End (FFE) – the initial selection and prioritisation of projects – rather than leaving these activities entirely to senior management. My impression is that this movement appears to be surprisingly slow, in view of the fact that there have been substantial, and sometimes rather prominent, examples of various types of involvement by project-related management in FFE and associated processes, for a very long time. However, these are not as widely recognised as their prominence appears to warrant – and they are not discussed at all in project management “standards” and the like.

This has prompted me to update and consolidate the many examples of past and present involvements by project-related management in FFE and associated processes that I have written about in past articles of this journal. These comprise the main body of this article.

However, I first looked in a generalised way at the place of projects in the context of organisational strategic management, and then at different perceptions of the scope of “front end” involvement by project management, one of which includes the FFE stage, in which projects are selected and prioritised. The latter was then the focal point for presenting the various existing types of project-related involvement. These comprised:

- External project-based FFE services, typified by FEL services given by EPC organisations on many major projects, and by Civil & Civic-type CND services on some smaller scale projects. There were also extensions to two forms of pre-FFE strategic assistance.
- In-house examples of such involvement in FFE, which I discussed under the headings of strategic investment portfolio management, and strategic initiative program management.

All the above were then brought together into a cumulative representation. It was pointed out that these represent abundant examples of such existing, but under-recognised, examples of project-related involvement in FFE, and that publicising such examples should help accelerate such project management involvement in production-based organisations.

Finally, I made a few notes on ways project managers have acquired both strategic management and business management skills in the past, which indicate that there are few impediments for acquisition of such additional skills for involvement in FFE and pre-FFE activities.

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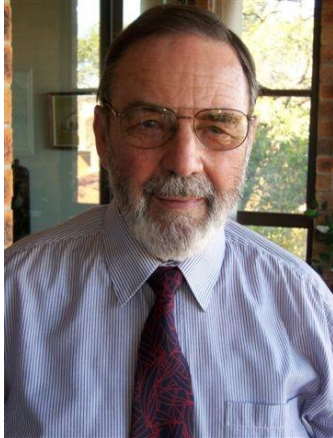
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