

Increasing project management (PM) contributions to “front ends”: Possibilities for PM to add early value to strategic outcomes by more direct involvement in organisational strategic initiation processes¹

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

Project management contributions to post-project-delivery outcomes/ success

Some of my recent articles in this journal article have been concerned with “project success” (Stretton 2023n), and with “project outcomes” (Stretton 2023j,k). These have been primarily associated with post-project-delivery outcomes, and corresponding successes associated with the achievement of favourable outcomes. As Pells noted in 2021, there has been an increasing project management focus in the last ten years on project outcomes and benefits. However, the broad thrust of my discussions in the above articles has been a cautionary one. I commented that too much of the literature still basically ignores the key role of customers/users in achieving their outcomes, whilst implying that project management has a much bigger role in actively achieving post-delivery outcomes than actually happens in practice.

Potential for project management to add pre-execution value to outcomes

However, there is another side to the outcomes coin which receives scant attention in much of the mainstream project management literature. This side of the coin relates to the pre-project-execution stages in which strategic outcomes are established in the first place. Our enquiry here will be about the potential for project management to add value to such outcomes by involvement in processes related to their being established.

It is rather obvious that, if the “right” strategic outcomes are not established in the first place, the chances of them contributing satisfactorily to the achievement of the broad organisational strategic objectives are severely jeopardised. It will then be necessary to make the “right” choice of strategic initiatives, and their component projects, to best facilitate achievement of these outcomes. Further, in the context of this article, the requirements of these component projects will then need to be properly specified.

The key importance of making good decisions in these initiating stages is obvious. How well placed is project management to facilitate making better decisions in these domains? This question receives scant attention in most key project management “standards” and the like. However, there is quite substantial material in the more general project management literature, to which we will be referring in the following

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investigations of opportunities for project management to value-add to outcomes in these pre-project-execution stages.

ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

A basic organisational strategic management framework

I will start with looking at processes in which strategic outcomes are initiated within a five-stage basic organisational strategic framework which I have been using for some time. As Booth 2018 has pointed out, there is no universal ‘standard’ set of processes for strategic management. However, the framework summarised in Figure 1 below appears to have stood the test of time and scrutiny by others quite well, so it may be reasonably representative of many strategic management contexts.

The basic headings of these five stages will be used as a framework, to which I will add stages which will be primarily concerned with the place of projects in this context. This will provide a basis for discussing potential opportunities for project management to add value in pre-project-execution stages. The basic stages of this framework are as follows.

1. Establish/ re- establish organisational strategic objectives	2. Develop strategic initiative options, evaluate, choose best	3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve org. strategic objectives.
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Figure 1. Outline of a basic organisational strategic management framework

As I have done in the past, I will continue to use the more generalised label of “strategic initiatives” – which combine projects and other strategic work – rather than “projects” on their own. This is because other strategic work is often a very significant component of strategic initiatives in certain contexts, as I discussed in some detail in Stretton 2023m.

Broad organisational strategic objectives, specific strategic outcomes, and initiatives to deliver them

Projects link to, emerge from and pertain to organisational strategies and plans. (Dalcher 2016c)

This section will develop a basic sequence of how strategic outcomes are initiated and developed, focusing particularly in the earlier stages prior to execution of strategic initiatives and their component projects

As indicated by the above quotation, we start with organisational strategies, and plans.

- The current broad organisational strategic objectives form the background outcomes to which all subsequent strategy-related activities need to directly align. Following Prieto 2015d these are described as Strategic Business Objectives, or SBOs
- The next stage is the identification of specific strategic outcomes which will best help the achievement of relevant sections of the strategic business objective (SBOs) at the time.

Establish broad organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs)

Identify specific business outcomes to help achieve SBOs

- This is followed by the development of specific strategic initiatives, and their component projects, to achieve these specific outcomes. This involves developing various options, evaluating them, and choosing the best option.
- Turning now to the project component of the chosen strategic initiative, it is important that the requirements for the project are fully and professionally specified. Failure to do so inevitably compromises achievement of the desired outcomes, as many of us can testify from personal experience.

Develop strategic initiative (and component project) options to achieve outcomes, evaluate, and choose the best

Specify requirements of project(s) (and other strategic work) to best help achieve outcomes

Aligning the outcome development stages with the strategic management model

We now align these planned strategic outcome development stages with the basic organisational strategic management framework in Figure 1, as follows.

1. Establish/ re- establish organisational strategic objectives		2. Develop strategic initiative options, evaluate, choose best	3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve org'l strategic objectives.
Establish broad organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs)	Identify specific business outcomes to help achieve SBOs	Develop strategic initiative (and component project) options to achieve outcomes, evaluate, and choose the best	Specify requirements of project(s) (and other strategic work) to best help achieve outcomes	Develop and execute strategic initiative component projects & other strategic work	Achieve strategic outcomes and realise benefits

Figure 2. Aligning the outcome development stages with the strategic management framework

ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT (PM) CONTRIBUTIONS TO STRATEGIC OUTCOMES DEVELOPMENT STAGES

We will look at each of the four planned strategic outcome development stages in turn, but in reverse order to the bullet-pointed summaries above.

PROJECT MGT. INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIFYING PROJECT REQUIREMENTS?

There are some domains where PM is closely involved in specifying requirements

Specify requirements of project(s) (and other strategic work) to best help achieve outcomes

There are many areas of project management practice in which project management is normally closely involved in helping specify project requirements. Agile-type projects are probably the best known of these, but there are many other such areas of practice.

However, there are also many areas where PM is not involved

However, there are also many areas in which the project requirements are specified by non-project people who are not familiar with project principles and practices. In my own experience, and that of many of my peers, all too often this means that the project management team then has to undertake substantial extra work to translate incomplete requirements into project-friendly format. This creates a lose-lose situation for both the project team and the customer/user.

Within the project management community, it is self-evident that the specification of project requirements is best done by project managers who are aware of the pitfalls that arise when this is done by people who are not familiar with project management processes and practice. Whilst it may often not be immediately self-evident to non-project people, it is an easy case to argue, and perhaps should be argued a good deal more often than appears to be the case at present.

Where not already in place, project management involvement in helping specify the project requirements has real potential to add value to the strategic outcomes

PM INVOLVEMENT IN CHOOSING THE BEST STRATEGIC INITIATIVE/PROJECT?

Develop strategic initiative
(and component project)
options to achieve outcomes,
evaluate, and choose the best

If I have interpreted the project management literature correctly, there appear to be two schools of thought about involving project management in developing strategic initiative (and component project) options, evaluating them, and choosing the best option.

Situations in which project management is not involved, and some critiques

The more traditional school of thought appears to be quite well represented in the following quotation from Baccarini 1999.

The correct formulation of a project's goal and purpose is outside the responsibility of the project team, whose focus and responsibility is the production of the project outputs.

I do not know the extent to which this may, or may not, apply in today's environment. However, it appears that there are still many instances in which project management is not involved in this second stage of organisational strategic management in Figure 2.

I discussed this second stage in some detail in Stretton 2018e, in which I focused particular attention on difficulties with reliable cost estimates associated with developing and comparing various strategic initiatives, and their projects, before choosing the best.

After discussing various approaches to estimating at these early stages, and the well-known optimism bias which appears to be practically endemic to certain domains, I also noted that Dalcher 2016b and many others have pointed out that, all too often, project managers are not involved in these Stage 2 activities. This was supported by quotations from two prominent authors' comments on the downside of their non-involvement. Morris 2013:136 focused on the non-involvement of project management in the estimating side of the above activities, as follows.

Too often, however, the Estimating function is performed by specialists who are not part of the 'projects' function, and project management has little or no engagement in the formulation of the project estimate(s). It would be surprising if the project or program manager did not have an opinion on the validity of the estimates being developed, and it would be regrettable therefore if she, or he, did not contribute to the estimate's preparation.

In the broader context of this stage of development of outcomes, Dalcher 2016a comments on such non-involvement as follows.

Crucially, it ignores the potential influence of project managers and leaders in shaping, advocating, negotiating, motivating and enhancing potential solutions.

Situations in which project management is, or can be, involved

In a recent article in this journal (Stretton 2023c) I updated and consolidated the many examples of past and present involvements by project-related management in what Kerzner & Zeitoun 2022 described as the “fuzzy front ends” (FFE) of projects, which I have written about in past articles of this journal. Two broad types of project-related FFE involvement discussed in these articles were summarised as follows.

- ***In-house:*** I discussed in-house examples of such involvement in FFE, particularly under the heading of Strategic Investment Portfolio Management. Organisations that use this approach have an in-place vehicle for promoting the involvement of project management in Stage 2 processes. As Dalcher 2020 expressed it,

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.

In effect, this could be seen as a governance vehicle, which would help ensure that project management is involved in helping choose the best strategic initiatives.

- ***External services:*** External project-based FFE services are typified by FEL (Front End Loading) services given by EPC (Engineering, Procurement, Construction) organisations on many major projects, and by Civil & Civic-type CND (Client Needs Determination) services on some smaller scale projects.

The client organisation needs a governance vehicle to best accommodate such external services. Strategic investment portfolio management could be one form of such a vehicle.

Overall, it is evident from these existing examples that there are potential benefits in broader contexts from involving project management in helping choose the best strategic initiatives/projects.

Where not already in place, PM involvement in helping choose the best strategic initiatives and projects has real potential to add value to the strategic outcomes

Borrowing from Stretton 2023c, we can represent the above discussions on existing PM involvement in the context of the organisational strategic management model as follows.

INTERNAL STRATEGIC INVESTMENT PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT <i>With Strategic Investment Portfolio Approach</i> Appoint internal Strategic Investment Portfolio manager(s) (or equivalent) early						
				PROJECT MANAGE development/execution		
1. Establish/ re- establish organisational strategic objectives		2. Develop strategic initiative options, evaluate, choose best		3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve org'l strategic objectives.
Establish broad organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs)	Identify specific business outcomes to help achieve SBOs	Develop strategic initiative (and component project) options to achieve outcomes, evaluate, and choose the best	Specify requirements of project(s) (and other strategic work) to best help achieve outcomes	Develop and execute strategic initiative component projects & other strategic work		Achieve strategic outcomes and realise benefits
EXTERNAL STRATEGIC INITIATIVE SUPPORT SERVICES Front End Loading (FEL) or Client Needs Determination (CND) types of external support services to help organisation develop and choose best strategic initiatives, and component projects, to best contribute to outcomes				EXTERNAL Project development/ execution/delivery SERVICES		

Figure 3. Representing internal and external project-related involvement in Stage 2 activities

PM INVOLVEMENT IN IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC OUTCOMES TO ACHIEVE SBOs?

Stage 2 involvement often includes helping identify specific business outcomes

Identify specific business outcomes to help achieve SBOs

Our experience in Civil & Civic was that many customers were not really well placed to specify the requirements of projects they felt they needed to progress their business – as exemplified by the following recollection of my late colleague, David Thorne, as reported in Clark 2002:93

“One of the philosophies that Dusseldorp [Civil & Civic’s CEO] pioneered in the company was to recognise and respond to a customer’s needs: to analyse their needs in a very definitive way. And so instead of just taking the client’s stated requirements for a building at face value, we got into the practice of questioning with them those instructions”.

This led to the development of a process we called Client Needs Determination (CND), which was concerned with helping the client organisation clarify and consolidate its underlying business needs, and the outcomes that would best satisfy those needs, before deciding on what project (if any) would best contribute to achieving these outcomes. I have discussed these processes at some length in previous articles in this journal, most recently in Stretton 2022k.

Similar circumstances also often apply for EPC organisations providing FEL (Front End Loading) services for major projects. For example, in Archibald et al 2012, Prieto says,

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”.

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.

This extension to involvement in choosing strategic initiatives suggests further potential for PM to help identify and shape the most relevant strategic outcomes

PM INVOLVEMENT IN HELPING ESTABLISH BROAD ORGANISAIONAL SBOs?

Involvement with specific business outcomes typically overlaps with establishing /re-establishing broader organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs)

Establish broad organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs)

Involvement in helping clients identify specific business outcomes typically also overlaps the establishment/re-establishment of the organisation’s broader strategic objectives. Prieto 2009 describes the involvement of an EPC organisation in helping the owner organisation in these processes as follows.

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 [super-large mega-programs/project].

As I have recorded in previous articles in this journal, our experience in Civil & Civic was that our CND services also sometimes extended back into helping client organisations clarify their broader strategic business objectives.

We can represent this, and the preceding type of external strategic planning support services by EPC organisations in the major projects domains in the context of the organisational strategic management model as follows.

1. Establish/ re- establish organisational strategic objectives		2. Develop strategic initiative options, evaluate, choose best	3. Elaborate/consolidate strategic initiatives	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve org'l strategic objectives.
Establish broad organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs)	Identify specific business outcomes to help achieve SBOs	Develop strategic initiative (and component project) options to achieve outcomes, evaluate, and choose the best	Specify requirements of project(s) (and other strategic work) to best help achieve outcomes	Develop and execute strategic initiative component projects & other strategic work	Achieve strategic outcomes and realise benefits
EXTERNAL STRATEGIC PLANNING SUPPORT SERVICES Help establish organisation's SBOs		Studies to help shape strategies			

Figure 4. Representing external strategic planning support services in Stage 1 processes

This further extension to involvement in helping establish broad organisational SBOs could be the most potent of all opportunities for PM to help identify and shape the most relevant strategic outcomes.

Discussions on the last two stages in particular have given examples of project-related providers such as EPC organisations becoming involved in pre-project-initiation activities, by helping organisations determine specific business outcomes they aspire to achieve, and in some cases helping them establish or re-establish their broader strategic business objectives.

Obviously, these extended project-related services have added value in helping client organisations establish/re-establish their strategic objectives, and plan for specific outcomes to help achieve them. These sections lead to the conclusion that more extensive involvement by project management in the above domains would benefit both certain types of customers, and project management itself, in win-win contexts.

Overall, it has been contended that project management can contribute very substantially to strategic outcomes via one or more of the above four pre-execution stages of the organisational strategic management processes, and that it is in the best interests of both customers and project management to focus on extending the range and frequency of such contributions at these early stages.

SUMMARY

This article is essentially a follow-up from some previous articles I have written on project management contributions to post-project-delivery outcomes/ success, but this time turning to the potential for project management to add pre-project-execution value to outcomes.

A basic organisational strategic management framework was first presented as a background model for referencing purposes. I then proposed a four-stage model of outcome development stages, comprising broad organisational strategic objectives, specific strategic outcomes, developing initiatives to achieve them, and specifying their requirements, particularly of the component projects. These four stages were then aligned with corresponding stages in the strategic management model.

Starting with the project requirements stage, it was noted that there are some domains where project management is closely involved in specifying requirements. However, there are also many areas where project management does not contribute to specifying requirements, which all too often produce sub-standard specifications.

- *It was concluded that, where not already in place, project management involvement in helping specify the project requirements has real potential to add value to the strategic outcomes.*

We then turned to the immediately preceding stage of developing and choosing the best strategic initiatives (and their component projects) to achieve the strategic outcomes. There are many situations in which project management is not involved in this work, and we discussed some criticisms of their absence. However, there are also many situations in which project management does become involved, and adds value.

- *It was concluded that, where not already in place, project management involvement in helping choose the best strategic initiatives and projects has real potential to add further value to the strategic outcomes.*

It was then pointed out that the above involvement often extends further back into the strategic planning process, to include helping customers identify specific business outcomes which will best contribute to achieving their broader organisation strategic objectives. This already happens in some domains, and it was concluded that:

- *This extension to involvement in choosing strategic initiatives suggests further potential for project management to help identify and shape the most relevant strategic outcomes.*

Finally, as just indicated, project management involvement with helping identify specific business outcomes tends to overlap with establishing/re-establishing broader organisational strategic business objectives (SBOs) at large.

- *This further extension to project management involvement in helping establish broad organisational SBOs could be the most potent of all the early opportunities to help identify and shape the most relevant strategic outcomes*

Overall, I am suggesting that there is very substantial potential for project management to contribute much more than it currently does to the development of the most relevant strategic outcomes by becoming increasingly involved in front-end project and strategic planning.

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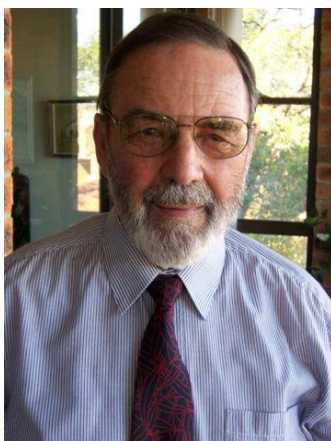
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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, 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

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