

Let's talk about public projects¹

Public project success factors²

Stanisław Gasik

Introduction

In the previous PM World Journal article (Gasik, 2024), we examined the concept of public project success criteria. When can a project be deemed successful? We differentiated between two sets of criteria: performance-related and parallel. The next question concerning project success is: how do you execute projects to ensure they are successful? What factors impact the attainment of success? Answering this question is equivalent to defining the **success factors of a public project**. A simple model illustrating the relations between projects, their success factors, and success criteria is depicted in Figure 1.

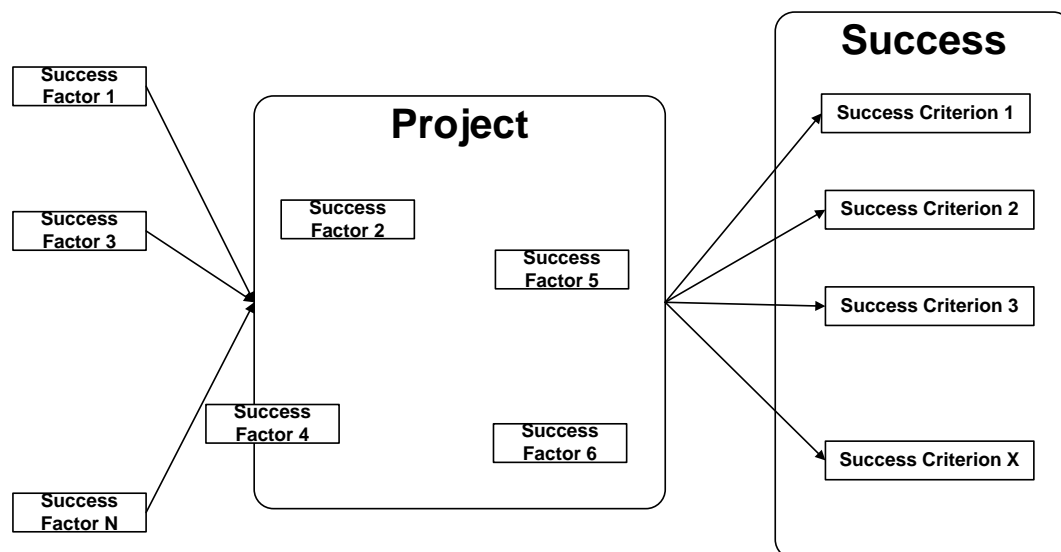


Figure 1. General project success model

¹ Editor's note: This article is the fifteenth in a series related to the management of public programs and projects, those organized, financed and managed by governments and public officials. The author, Dr. Stanisław Gasik, is the author of the book "*Projects, Government, and Public Policy*", recently published by CRC Press / Taylor and Francis Group. That book and these articles are based on Dr. Gasik's research into governmental project management around the world over the last decade. Stanisław is well-known and respected by PMWJ editors; we welcome and support his efforts to share knowledge that can help governments worldwide achieve their most important initiatives.

² How to cite this paper: Gasik, S. (2024). Public project success factors, Let's talk about public projects, series article, *PM World Journal*, Volume XIII, Issue III, March.

Public projects are conducted within a complex environment involving various stakeholders such as executing companies, institutions overseeing the work, the public, or government entities – to highlight the primary groups. In reality, any stakeholder, by definition, possesses the ability to influence project implementation and thus its success. Furthermore, any well-executed action within a project can contribute to its success, whereas poor execution can lead to problems and ultimately failure.

It's important to recognize that the success of a project isn't solely dependent on the actions of its team and the organizational hierarchy above it. Factors beyond the project team's control, such as fluctuating product prices or weather changes, can significantly impact success. Thus, it's possible to differentiate between **internal** and **external success factors** affecting the project.

All of this underscores the complexity involved in defining (success criteria) and achieving (success factors) project success.

General and public project success factors

In the success factors of a public project, as in other areas of interest in public projects, two groups can be distinguished (figure 2):

- Success factors affecting projects of all sectors (sector-independent; **general success factors**)
- Success factors specific to the public sector (**specific public project success factors**)

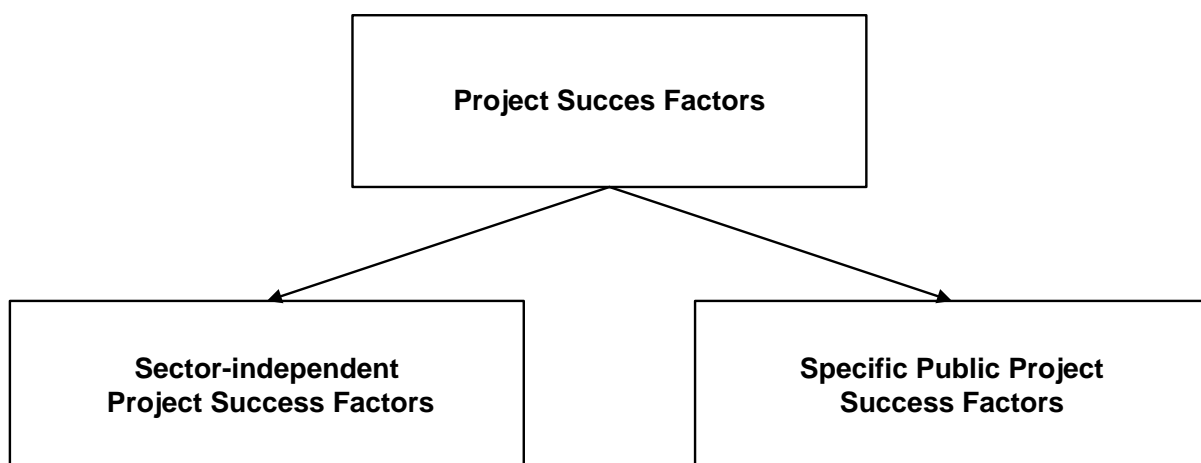


Figure 2. Types of project success factors

General factors include, for example, the use of effective management practices, methodologies, risk management, and accurate budget estimation. Many public project success factors are similar to those in other sectors. Researchers have been addressing this subject since at least the 1980s (Pinto & Slevin, 1987), and it remains relevant till today (e.g., APM (2014); Camilleri, 2016; Kumar et al., 2023). Even early studies consider factors such as defining a project's mission, gaining top management support, establishing clear schedules, among others, as key success factors (Pinto & Slevin, *ibid*). Fortune & White (2006) highlight top management support, clear

objectives, updated plans, effective communication, and user feedback, among others. Indeed, applying any effective management practice can be considered a project success factor. APM (2014) identified the following as the most important success factors effective governance, capable sponsors, aligned supply chains, proven methods and tools, appropriate standards, commitment to project success, supportive organizations, Engaged users or operators, competent project professionals, and capable project teams, and secure fundings.

Describing general success factors would exceed the scope of this planned article. Therefore, we will focus on success factors specific to public projects.

Hierarchy of public administration vs. project success factors

Public projects are executed within a more hierarchical environment compared to projects in other sectors.

Like in other sectors, the project management team (along with all other team members) plays a crucial role in its success. They are responsible for daily project management activities such as assigning project tasks to team members, monitoring and controlling progress, managing risks, and motivating team members. Without the effective collaboration of a team led by its management, no project can succeed.

The first level of project success factors pertains to the project level.

Projects across all sectors are carried out by organizations that influence their execution. The quality of an organization's influence on project execution is assessed, among other things, by organizational project management maturity models (e.g., PMI, 2018; Canada TBoCS, 2013; Axelos, 2015). Organizations can impact the success of their projects in various ways, such as defining project delivery methodologies or establishing requirements for the qualifications of project personnel.

The second level of project success factors relates to the organization level.

These two levels of success factors are common to projects in all sectors. However, in public projects, there is an additional level of these factors: the governmental one.

Similar to other operational areas, governments have the authority to impact the projects undertaken within their jurisdictions. This kind of project success factor isn't present in projects in other sectors, where project delivery organizations operate autonomously without higher organizational control. Governments can draw from experiences gained from their own projects or practices at the government level in other countries. Based on this, best practices for implementing public projects can be documented and distributed. The most significant practices may be codified into laws or regulations governing public projects. Government regulations typically outline governance structures and processes rather than detailed management procedures. Examples include defining project phases, establishing institutions responsible for supporting project management, or mandating project status reporting at specific intervals.

The third level of project success factors specific to public projects is the governmental one.

The degree of government involvement in achieving project success, as per the Governmental Project Management Maturity Model (GPM3®), varies from a complete disinterest in project management issues to the implementation of continuous processes aimed at improving governmental-level project management practices (Gasik, 2023).

In case where a project fails to achieve success, it's essential to consider whether this was influenced by the actions of the project team, higher organizational levels, or external success factors.

Success factors can be categorized based on the lowest organizational level capable of influencing their implementation. For instance, the establishment of processes to ensure projects align with the country's strategy and policies is decisively influenced by the government. Organizations lower in the hierarchy lack the authority to define such processes. Project management methodologies may be defined at either the organization or government level. And decisions regarding communication of project progress to stakeholders may be made at the project level. However, each lower-level success factor may be mandated by actions taken at higher levels, reflecting the essence of organizational hierarchy. For example, government-level institutions can establish governance processes for all public projects or mandate stakeholder involvement in project implementation. These institutions may consider any success factor that could be defined at the organization or individual project level to be so important that they decide that they must be met in all public projects in their jurisdiction.

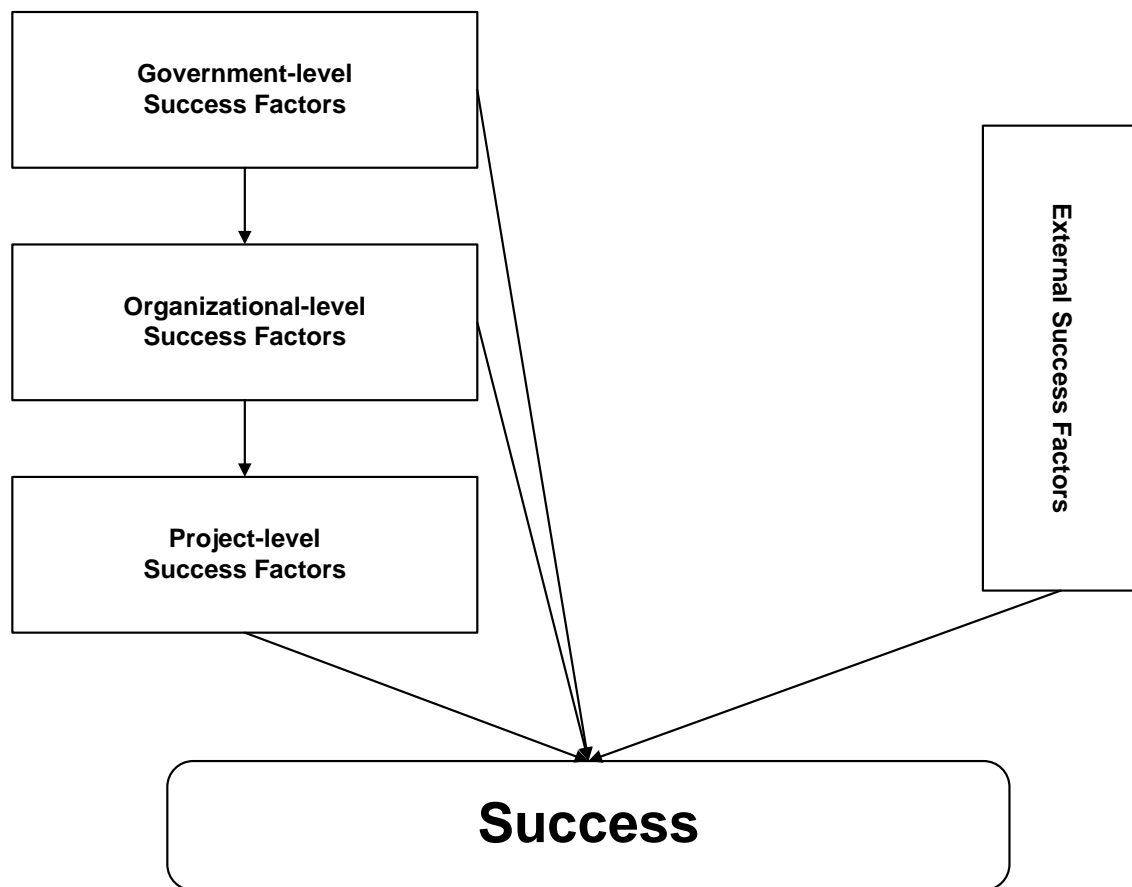


Figure 3. Hierarchy of public projects' success factors

In the following sections, we will analyze the public project success factors of each organizational level, as identified in a survey conducted by Gasik in 2023.

Government-level factors

Political support

Public projects are the implementation component of public policies. Public policies, in turn, are typically influenced by politics. Politics involve activities related to the governance of public policies, institutions, and resources, and can also be seen as efforts to acquire and retain power. Thus, within the sphere of politics lie the elements necessary to ensure the success of public projects.

The primary factor is often political support for a project or program by the ruling group (e.g., Jacobson and Choi, 2008; Anthopoulos et al., 2016; Damoah and Akwei, 2016). Additionally, opposition groups should be considered for two reasons. Firstly, opposition groups can influence current public sentiments regarding public projects. Secondly, the potential for a change in the ruling group, and how that might affect their stance on the project, should also be taken into consideration.

Compliance of projects with policies and strategies

Projects should implement the policies and strategies of national or local governments. Countries should have clearly defined development objectives, and projects serve as

the primary development tool. Development is inherently project-oriented. Public projects are beneficial when they align with the overall functioning of the state. Each project should contribute to achieving public goals. Projects that are developed independently from governmental policies and strategies may not be deemed successful. It is the government's responsibility to establish criteria for initiating projects in a manner that selects only those that align with the implementation of public policies.

Regulations on public procurement

Clear and comprehensive public procurement regulations are essential for the success of public projects. These regulations should ensure that suppliers most capable of delivering contract products are selected. The criteria for selecting contract suppliers must be clearly defined. Well-defined regulations ensure impartiality, transparency, honesty, and help prevent corruption. Meeting this criterion for success is solely the responsibility of the government.

Regulations on public projects

Standard procurement regulations often cannot adequately address project-specific considerations. Therefore, the next public project success factor is the enacting of public project regulations. These regulations can encompass various success factors outlined in this article, such as project portfolio management, principles of public project governance, reporting methodologies, handling deviations from plans, and the qualifications of project management personnel. In this regard, public project regulations can be viewed as a meta-factor influencing the success of public projects.

Regulations governing public projects may either be integrated within broader public procurement regulations or may be established through decisions made at a level below legislative laws (executive orders, etc.).

Evaluation of project maturity of public organizations

The project management maturity level of organizations determines their capacity to execute projects efficiently. This assessment typically arises from regulations implemented at the national level. For instance, Canada has a policy aimed at evaluating and enhancing the implementation capabilities of public institutions (Canada TBoCS, 2013). Similarly, in the United States, federal-level institutions are mandated to evaluate and enhance their methods for executing public projects and programs (US Congress, 2015).

Support for project implementation by governmental project management offices

Governmental Project Management Offices (GPMOs) are entities sometimes having the rank of ministries (such as India's MOSPI) or functioning independently as government bodies (like the UK's IPA), tasked primarily with ensuring the efficient implementation of projects. These entities may oversee various responsibilities, such as establishing governance processes for public projects, providing project support, or outlining the qualifications necessary for participation in public projects. GPMOs may also assist projects in resolving issues that cannot be addressed at lower organizational tiers.

Organization-level factors

Managing public project portfolios

Not all projects that have the potential to further public policy objectives can be executed—sometimes due to insufficient resources like finances, personnel, or market demand. Hence, public organizations need specific guidelines for selecting projects that align closely with policy objectives, maximize resource utilization, and minimize risks. Portfolio management extends beyond project selection. Throughout implementation, it's essential to monitor project compliance with policies and assess their likelihood of success. There might be occasions where reallocating resources between projects, adjusting planned goals, or even killing a project becomes necessary.

Methodologies of managing public sector projects

Public projects should be implemented following well-defined methodologies. A PM methodology is a set of principles, practices, procedures, and techniques used to guide and govern the execution of projects from initiation to completion. It provides a structured framework for organizing, planning, executing, controlling, and closing projects, ensuring that they are completed efficiently and effectively. There are various types of project management methodologies (waterfall, agile...), each with its own approach, tools, and techniques. The choice of methodology depends on factors such as public procurement regulations, project requirements, organizational culture, and the nature of the project.

Acknowledgment of project management as a strategically important capability of public organizations

Projects serve as a primary tool of effecting change within any public organization. They can also directly facilitate the implementation of public policies, with infrastructure being probably the best example.

For public projects to thrive, public institutions must acknowledge project management as a strategic asset. Organizations should explicitly highlight the significance of project management in their foundational documents. Concrete actions reflecting this acknowledgment may include appointing a Chief Project Officer, establishing a Project Management Office (PMO), providing project management training, or outlining career paths in this field.

Project governance processes

Governance encompasses the fundamental principles, structures, and processes governing the operations of organizations and ensuring their enforcement. Public project governance is a component of public governance. It consists of two primary components.

The first component concerns the role of projects in accomplishing government objectives and those of its subordinate administrations—an aspect discussed earlier as a critical success factor at the government level. The second component, governance of projects, focuses on essential elements of project implementation.

Governance of projects involves the structures involved in project implementation, spanning from organizational boards and individual units to project-level arrangements. The second aspect of governance of projects pertains to the overall structure of the project implementation process, such as drafting the project charter, developing project plans, or establishing reporting mechanisms.

Setting up rules to allow only qualified project managers to be included in projects

Managing public projects requires highly skilled personnel. Firstly, proficiency in general project management skills is essential, such as constructing a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS), calculating critical paths, or implementing risk management processes. Secondly, familiarity with public project regulations is crucial, particularly understanding public procurement laws and regulations governing public projects. The third aspect of qualification for public project managers involves understanding the local context in which the project operates. This includes knowledge of pricing structures, environmental considerations, and the availability of resources necessary for project implementation.

Project-level factors

Informing the stakeholders about the projects

Stakeholders need to be kept informed about projects and their progress. In the case of public projects, stakeholders mainly include the communities benefiting from the projects and all taxpayers, who are indirectly the project owners. It's crucial to inform these groups about the projects underway to prevent the delivery of unacceptable results and to ensure they have the opportunity to react if the project implementation is inadequate. The project management team can independently decide to inform project stakeholders about the project and its advancement, unless higher organizational levels have implemented specific practices in this regard.

Engaging stakeholders in the implementation of projects

Stakeholders shouldn't just be kept in the loop about projects and their progress but can also play an active role in their implementation. This involvement can be facilitated by establishing advisory and consulting groups that collaborate with project implementation teams. Members of these groups not only receive updates on the project's progress but also offer feedback on completed and upcoming tasks. The existence of such groups helps to monitor the quality of project implementation processes and mitigate potential misuses often associated with public projects. Additionally, advisory bodies offer insights into the needs of the communities benefiting from the projects.

Summary

Achieving success for public projects is a multifaceted task, influenced by institutions across the hierarchical spectrum—from the project by the organization to the government level. Certain factors, such as the alignment between public projects and public policies, must be addressed at the level where policies are formulated. Others,

like project planning principles, can be established within public organizations. At the project level, there are some success factors specific to public projects, but most have a general, sector-independent character (listed briefly in the introductory phases of this article).

The public project success model should be used for project planning. It is also frequently utilized when projects fall short of achieving success. The model presented here underscores that within hierarchical organizations, analyzing project failures necessitates examining levels beyond the individual project: the implementing organization and, ultimately, the government. Regardless of whether the government shapes or influences project management, it is always accountable for the success of each public project. Additionally, it's imperative to assess whether the project's failure was influenced by external factors independent of the governance hierarchy of the public administration.

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About the Author



Stanisław Gasik, PhD, PMP

Warsaw, Poland



Dr. Stanisław Gasik, PMP is a project management expert. He graduated from the University of Warsaw, Poland, with M. Sc. in mathematics and Ph. D. in organization sciences (with a specialty in project management). Stanisław has over 30 years of experience in project management, consulting, teaching, and implementing PM organizational solutions. His professional and research interests include project knowledge management, portfolio management, and project management maturity. He is the author of the only holistic model of project knowledge management spanning from the individual to the global level.

Since 2013, his main professional focus has been on public projects. He was an expert in project management at the Governmental Accountability Office, an institution of the US Congress. He is the author of "[Projects, Government, and Public Policy](#)," a book that systematizes knowledge about government activities in the area of project management.

He was a significant contributor to PMI's PMBOK® Guide and PMI Standard for Program Management and contributed to other PMI standards. He has lectured at global PMI and IPMA congresses and other international conferences. His web page is www.gpm3.eu.