# Defining Project Success – Part 2
## Can we bring clarity to the question?

This paper is the second of a four-part series in which an attempt has been made to capture the collective wisdom of the leading participants in an extended LinkedIn discussion over the first six months of 2014. The actual original texts have been edited for grammar and spelling to make for easier reading on line. The observations quoted are the opinions and property of the contributors as noted. Published here September 2014.

### Editor's Note:

As we noted in Part 1 of this series, the following extracts are intended to capture and summarize the most valuable ideas presented in the conversation on LinkedIn between February 17 and May 9, 2014. To keep the summary manageable, we have again chosen only a limited number of the participants based on our view of their most perceptive comments. We would remind readers that these people are those practicing experts that we feel most likely to represent the millions of opinions available on the Internet.

In Part 1 of this series, discussion participants focused on what standards publications had to say about Project Success. In this Part 2, the discussion attempted to focus on clarifying the question.

### Introduction-Recap

Matthew Weaver, PMP, CSM, ITIL[1] started off the LinkedIn conversation with the question:
## "How do you define project success?"
Matthew then followed his own question with this observation:

While I realize this is a recurring topic,[2] I note this morning as I work through the PMBOK[3] 5th edition, that they have added a new section "Project Success" (page 35) that clarifies rather succinctly the definition of project success and the project manager's role in it:
> "Success of the project should be measured in terms of completing the project within the constraints of scope, time, cost, quality, resources, and risks as approved between the project managers [sic] and senior management."

Later, the PMBOK authors write:
> "Project success should be referred to the last baselines approved by the authorized stakeholders."

### Stan Krupinski[4] quotes Wikipedia, Andrzej Wardaszka[5] compares delivery with business case

### Stan Krupinski

In Part 1 of this series, Stan quoted Wikipedia as describing the objectives of Project Management, in part, as follows:
> "Project objectives define target status at the end of the project, the reaching of which is considered necessary for the achievement of planned benefits. They can be formulated as SMART: Specific, Measurable (or at least evaluable) achievement, Achievable (recently Agreed-to or Acceptable are used regularly as well), Realistic (given the current state of organizational resources) and Time terminated (bounded). The evaluation (measurement) occurs at the project closure. "

Project success is based on whether or not the project delivered a ***value added product or service*** to the sponsoring organization. It is not based on whether or not the Project Manager successfully followed the PMBOK user manual. Meeting all the PMBOK requirements, and then delivering something useless is silly.

*Andrzej Wardaszka*

Because all projects have an end date, one should be able to declare success or failure at that point in time. Obviously, all you can do is compare actual results to baseline triple constraints.[6] In theory, if the team has met or exceeded the baselines, you should be allowed to declare the project a success at project close. However, I would now like to agree with Max earlier that this success can change or be re-evaluated later.

The investment decision to go ahead with a particular project relied on a business case. Over the years and months that follow, when the PM and project team have all moved on to bigger and better things, someone (hopefully) will track whether the return on investment meets what was promised in the business case. Based on that analysis, another assessment of whether the project was a 'success' will be performed.

This now really becomes a question of whether the project was a good business investment (and the sponsor should be solely accountable here). However, perception is reality. If there is a lingering feeling that the project was not a good decision, in time that will translate into the project being a failure. A project that was once initially viewed as a success, can later be viewed as a failure.

## Richard Stubbs[7] prefers satisfied customers

@ Max: Thank you for your comments to my post on 2/22/2013. I also have worked in both the private and public sectors and I believe my observations are correct with regard to delivering successful public sector projects. Projects will be successful in both the private and public sectors if appropriate project sponsorship is provided, and proper project management techniques and methodologies are consistently applied. If this is not the case, the project will have problems whether it is being executed within either a private or public sector entity.

Like private sector projects, public sector projects may also experience changes in scope, schedule and costs. If these changes are managed appropriately through the change management process, then the project will be completed successfully. This does not mean that the product of the project will be successful. For example, limited budgets may impact final scope or quality such that the resulting product does not meet the expectations of the users. However, this may also occur within the private sector.

I am familiar with the department/management behaviors within public agencies you mentioned in your response regarding: must spend any remaining budget money at the end of the fiscal year so that it is not lost to other activities in the upcoming fiscal year budget. And at the same time, ignoring cost overruns from a previous year's budget versus actual costs. You're right. These practices do occur and they are part of the culture. People have learned to manage the system to get their jobs done and projects completed.

In my experience, for the most part, meeting scope requirements and having satisfied customers is the determination of project (and product) success. Satisfied customers result when a project delivers a product that meets the needs of the customer and is useable. Schedule and cost components are important; you don't want to take forever and you don't want to break the bank, otherwise no one will be satisfied. But these components are less important to the overall determination of success if scope and customer satisfaction are achieved. Meeting schedule and cost goals enhances success, but not delivering on scope and not achieving customer satisfaction are much greater detractors to overall success than missing on schedule and cost goals.

The definition of project success from the PMBOK 5th edition presented by Matthew in the opening comments of this discussion, I believe, is a good definition from a PMBOK perspective. The PMBOK addresses generally recognized project management knowledge and practices. The PMBOK was not intended to address product management knowledge and practices, and, therefore, there is no reason for the PMBOK to include product success within the definition of, nor as a factor for, project success.

I understand that project management success and product success are logically separate results, but in many cases the success of one is strongly linked to the other, especially in the eyes of management. It is the responsibility of the product manager to define the product and the project manager to deliver the best possible outcome given the constraints of scope, schedule, cost, quality, resources and risks. In order to deliver a successful project, I believe the project manager must have a personal stake and vision in the success of the project and product.

The project manager's role, as a key communicator between the sponsor/product manager/stakeholders/customer, has an obligation to identify and communicate issues and risks with the project. That includes risks to the product that may cause the product to fall short of meeting necessary scope and user expectations. Project success then, in this case, can only be achieved with product success. However, a project manager might find it very difficult to convince management that a project was successful if the product failed. That's because the project manager should have been able to identify, communicate and mitigate (through the change control process) the issues and risks that led to product failure long before the project was completed.

## Brian Phillips'[8] also supports customer satisfaction

There is a common view that "as a professional project manager, I have completed the project to specification and this is the measure of success". If the new PMBoK had left it there, then it would be sadly lacking. This approach to Project Management success is about the performance of good practice (which is important), but if it does not consider the outcome and benefits from the project, we are not managing projects well. Ultimately, project success is determined by the results for the customer.

One of the suggested contents of a Project Charter refers to project success from the perspective of the "project initiator or sponsor":[9]

> "Project approval requirements (i.e., what constitutes project success, who decides the project is successful, and who signs off the project)"

This moves more closely to my understanding of project success – it's all about what the customer considers to be project success. We once delivered a project late and over budget, with last minute approval from the sponsor after advising him we COULD complete on time and cost, BUT with reduced quality. He wanted quality so we 'FAILED' in the strict terms of the definition, but the customer was very happy with the result.

Referring to the original question, from the project manager's perspective my view is that we succeed if the customer is satisfied. But there are two different measures – our professional performance in the project and the customer's expectations from the project.

The comparison is like being the best player in a team game, but you lose the game. You can feel some professional vindication (I did everything right), but if the end goal was to win, the project was unsuccessful.

@David Hatch: Re the London Olympics (thanks Max for the example[10]), there are published reports on the real success factors, with the games themselves as Part 1 and the Legacy Asset Disposal as Part 2 with a focus on the realization of benefits from asset sales and lease. This extract makes it clear how Project success is judged:[11]

> "The majority of venues and facilities on the Olympic Park now have an agreed long-
> term use and legacy tenant"

Like beauty, success is in the eye of the beholder.

## Max Wideman[12] introduces KPIs and KSIs

@Matthew: In your earlier post you quoted: "Success of the project should be measured in terms of completing the project within the constraints of scope, time, cost, quality, resources, and risks as approved between the project managers [sic] and senior management." And, contrary to Standish Reports, "Project success should be referred to the last baselines approved by the authorized stakeholders."

While I think the first statement is correct from the project manager's standpoint, I am sure we are all familiar with the concept of "scope creep". That is, typically the increase of project scope without corresponding increases of time and cost allowances, and hence no last updated baselines. However Standish have a point. They may be taking aim, not at project managers, but at Project Owners who can also be guilty of scope creep by adding incremental embellishments for their own benefit (e.g. political gain) albeit with approved budget changes that add to the original estimates.

@Stan Krupinski quoted Wikipedia as saying "Project objectives define target status at the end of the project, the reaching of which is considered necessary for the achievement of planned benefits. They can be formulated as 'SMART Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)' ".

Yes, though not defined by PMI, KPIs are a popular metric that refer to the level of performance of the management of the project and focus primarily on the success of the project's management (rather than the product). The latter, i.e. KSIs, refer to the level of capability of the *product* to deliver the expected benefits, i.e. the success of the product.

@Brian Phillips: Thanks Brian for your comments on the latest PMBOK Guide. The example you give is why I advocate the introduction of Key Success Indicators (KSIs, not KPIs), and have been doing so since 2000.

@Andrzej: Thanks for the comment. Be careful to draw a distinction between *project* success and *product* success. You can have one or the other but the ideal is to have success in both. Just to muddy the water a bit further, there are lots of projects where the team doesn't even know what "done" looks

like – so even that can be problematic for determining project success. Product success in terms of benefits can only be finally determined after a period of the product being in use.

@Richard: It's all very well, but which criteria are uppermost is very dependent on the type of project. Opening an Olympic Games late, for example, with all the seats filled for opening day is going to make for a lot of unhappy campers – including the games' sponsors. Better by far to abandon some of the "scope" in order to be on time.

## David Willcox[13] presents an analogy

Cook is a captain of a sailing ship. Captain Cook has been asked by the government to deliver, to a remote island on the other side of the world, some living animals that are then intended to breed and consequently support a colony on the island in two years time. He needs to deliver the animals alive in two months time navigating difficult stormy waters to get there.

Project Owner = Government
Project Manager = Captain Cook

Captain Cook and his crew of merry men (never forget the Project team!) can consider themselves successful if they deposit the animals alive on the island in two months. However, the Project cannot be considered a success unless the animals breed sufficiently to support the colony in two years time. The delivery of the benefits of the project is the responsibility of the owner not the project manager.

By the way, after the ship set off, the Government determined that there was a better island 100 miles away from the first that would better support life. A pigeon was sent to the ship with this change of plan and the Captain sent one back saying it would take another two additional weeks to get there. He achieved this revised target. That's classic change control.

@Larry: This could easily become a semantic discussion that I want to avoid if at all possible. If the animals didn't breed and support the colony and you spoke to a member of the government, they would be unlikely to say that the project was a success! They paid out a bagful of gold to Cook and crew but didn't get the benefits.

So the point I was trying to make with the analogy is that there are two dimensions of success to look at:
   1) Project Team - did we deliver to Time, Cost, Quality, Scope et al?
   2) Project Owner - were the stated benefits of the Project realized? (maybe a product but not always)

If you speak with the Sydney government about the project to build an iconic Opera house, I'm sure they will say it was an ultimate success in terms of the benefit case despite the Project team delivery being one of the worst ever on record!

## David Hatch[14] takes a more personal view

I agree with David Poll's remark, the only true measure of project success is 'How the organization you work for defines Project Success?'. Perhaps this is easier to grasp for those of us who are freelance project managers, but basically for us it comes down to 'Is the client happy?', and 'Are they going to hire me again?'.

Therefore, I put a lot more emphasis perhaps than a permanent project manager on finding out what the client expectations are for the project or programme and establishing clear measures that provide proof that the project has delivered.

Everything else is a secondary consideration, and I think a lot of project managers get confused between measures based on whether they did a good job of managing and controlling the project and measures based on whether the project was a success.

The Olympic Games analogy is a perfect example:
- Did everything go according to plan? Obviously not!
- Did everyone do a good job? Probably not.
- Did everyone get what they wanted? Unlikely not.
- But were the games a success? The consensus seems to be that they were.

The interesting unanswered question is of course, what were the real measures of success in the first place? I suspect that they were never published in the public domain. As the report says, we wait with bated breath to find out what the mysterious legacy benefits will be and who will benefit from them.

I define my success as meeting the expectations of my clients. They define what constitutes the success of their project and decide whether the project has met those criteria. So my success is based on satisfying that expectation.

@Larry: I think David W's Captain Cook story highlights an important issue that is often ignored in discussions about project management. Whilst Larry is technically right in what he says he has actually missed the subtle point being made. The owner of the project (e.g. The Government) are trying to set up a colony on an uninhabited Island. That is their project and the measure of success for that project is that the colony is well established in two years time.

Cook has been appointed to deliver the livestock to seed the island for habitation. He is the project manager responsible for that stage of the project, but he isn't responsible for the delivery of the entire project. Just the part he has been contracted to do. However, the success of the project will still be measured by the governments overall goal of establishing a colony on the island.

In other words Cook can succeed as a project manager, but the client can still end up considering the project a failure. And by implication the reverse can also be true. Cook might have delivered the livestock to the wrong island, late, or not at all, and the settlement might still have thrived.

**Larry Moore[15] reinforces project vs. product. Cliona O'Hanrahan[16] recommends coffee and smile**

*Larry Moore*

David: In my opinion, your analogy suffers from a fatal flaw. You said, "However, the Project cannot be considered a success unless the animals breed sufficiently to support the colony in 2 years time." This statement confuses the project itself with the PRODUCT of the project. The animals, delivered as requested, are the PRODUCT of the project. Whether they breed sufficiently or not has NOTHING to do with the project that delivered them. The success or failure of the project never hinges on the subsequent success or failure of the product (presuming that the project's requirements for completion are properly defined).

You yourself said, "Captain Cook and his crew of merry men (never forget the Project team!) can consider themselves successful if they deposit the animals alive on the island in 2 months." Therefore, the project achieved its revised target, and the project was successful. What happens after that is NOT any part of the [i.e. Cook's] project.

### *Cliona O'Hanrahan*

For me there is only one thing that amounts to project success. That is, as a project manager, you are able to roll out the project in line with the agreed requirements. I always try to make it uncomplicated because the business is really dependent on you to roll the product out whatever the environment. That's because this is what the business requires to improve or make the business viable.

I believe my greatest strength as a project manager is:
- Firstly to ensure all of the requirements are agreed between business and project management and
- Secondly you setup great relationships across the board to work towards the ultimate goal of rolling out the project.

And I always find that coming to the table with a cup of coffee in hand and a smile always helps. With this approach I have rolled out a lot of projects over the years and helped companies to make their targets and definitely improve their bottom line.

That for me is true success. :)

### Mounir Ajam's[17] collected responses

@Cliona: The same comment applies in your scenario and I would add:
Project Management – as an essential component of the business – is not only about delivery, it is also about realizing benefits for the project owner. So if you deliver a fantastic project that does not deliver benefits, it means you as a person (and project manager) did your job, but someone else failed in authorizing the project or setting the objectives, or accepted a flawed feasibility study.

@Larry: Reading your post, Yes – you are 100% correct – Cook has to deliver the animals live, and that will lead to delivering the product of the project successfully. So, what you said is correct – but only partially. Why? Because you focused on the project manager and the project deliverable but ignored the business context.

However, let's back up a bit and think about the business objective from the owner's (government) perspective. Then the objective is not only to deliver the animals, but for them to breed and sustain the colony. In other words, delivering the product of the project – a product that does not deliver benefit – is a failure from the project owner perspective!

In Part 3, the discussion turned to program structuring as the basis for project success.

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[1] For more information about Matthew Weaver and his work, visit his web site at www.ProjectWeavers.com. You can reach him by Email at Info@ProjectWeavers.com, or call toll free (855) 871-9246 (USA)
[2] In fact if you do a Google search for "Project Success" you are likely to get over five million responses and if you search with "Defining Project Success" you could get around eleven million responses. These figures suggest that

either the subject has been worn to death or there is a lot of room for differences of opinion and hence that the answer to the question is far from precise.

[3] PMBOK® stands for the Project Management Institute's A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Now in its 5th edition, Pennsylvania, 2013.

[4] Stan Krupinski: Project Manager

[5] Andrzej Wardaszka: Watson Solutions Project Manager at IBM

[6] "Triple constraints" here means scope, quality, time and cost.

[7] Richard Stubbs: Experienced Project Manager, PMP Certification

[8] Brian Phillips: Portfolio, Program, Project and Benefits Management Consultant

[9] PMBoK® Guide Fifth Edition, section 4.1.3.1, page 71

[10] See London Olympics referenced briefly in the next section

[11] Check out the UK Audit Office reports (It is a serious read)
http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/1213/london_2012_post-games_review.aspx

[12] Max Wideman: Well known Project Management Consultant

[13] David Willcox: Project Management Consultant

[14] David Hatch
Experienced Programme/Project Manager

[15] Larry Moore: Project Management Professional

[16] Cliona O'Hanrahan: MPM Prince2 and PMBOK Project Manager specializing in project delivery for Telecoms, Banking and Digital enterprises

[17] Mounir Ajam: PM Author | Entrepreneur | CAM2P™ Developer | Speaker | Consultant