

# **Practical Project Management: Tips, Tactics, and Tools**

**By Harvey A. Levine**

**(A book review by R. Max Wideman)**

## **Introduction**

For long-standing readers of the Project Management Institute's PMnetwork magazine, the name Harvey Levine will be synonymous with scheduling software guru. No doubt this will be because of the many articles he wrote in his Software Forum column, as a Contributing Editor, about commercial scheduling programs, and their various attributes and incarnations. Of course he has written a lot of other material as well but you would conclude that scheduling is his forte. In fact, he has done much more for the Institute, having been a member of the PMI board of directors, president of the Institute, and then chairman of the Board of Directors back in the 1980s. Indeed, he was honored for his efforts, including significant contributions to the Institute's Body of Knowledge by being voted a Fellow in 1998.

So, yet another book on project management you might ask? The difference is that Harvey has set down his knowledge, understanding and experience of project management honed over some forty years of exposure in the industry. This latest book provides profound practical and pragmatic advice, not just for the project management practitioner but also for senior management seeking to leverage the best out of the discipline in today's competitive world. His lighthearted style makes for easy and enjoyable reading without detracting from the value of the message.

This book is not confined to a dissertation on critical path planning and scheduling activities, resource leveling and the like but to the whole spectrum of project management. Its topics range from new paradigms of portfolio management to project communications and how to make them work. It integrates new ideas with true and trusted old ones, and the text abounds with useful sidebar tips.

## **Book structure**

The book contains thirteen sections each with a number of chapters ranging up to six in each for a total of 41. The chapters are generally short and to the point, often based on previous material that Harvey has written. He claims that the book may be read from cover to cover as a complete guide to practical project management. If you decide on this course, the sections you will cover in order are:<sup>1</sup>

1. Setting up the Project management Operation
2. Getting started
3. Scheduling
4. Resource and Workforce Management
5. Budgeting and cost control
6. Risk management and Contingency
7. Maintaining the Plan
8. Performance Measurement
9. Project Portfolio Management
10. Project Management, Enterprise Project Management and Enterprise Resource Planning

11. Project Management and Professional Services Automation
12. Tools of the Trade
13. Making Project Management Work

However, in the Preface, Harvey describes how certain chapters may be selected to satisfy various types of information seekers. For example: For those looking to understand the basics, a subset of 15 chapters is recommended. For specific focused topics in the style of editorials, 10 are recommended. For in-depth topics disclosing the "finer points", another 11 are listed and, finally for a few way-out subjects, three are identified.<sup>2</sup>

True, that as a result of this structure, there is some duplication, but we did not find this objectionable. As Harvey observes:<sup>3</sup>

Project management is a many-faceted discipline. It will usually involve project scoping, task planning and scheduling, resource planning and workforce management, budgeting and cost control, risk and contingency management, change management, and project closeout. And while we are doing this, we will need to apply skills in maintaining quality, avoiding scope creep, and managing extensive and sensitive communication, with numerous stakeholders, in widespread locations.

Actually, we've yet to come across a project manager that actually does all of these things, at the same time, on the same project, at least without a lot of assistance. But Harvey goes on to say:

All of these skills that are specific to project management must be applied by individuals who are also endowed with the more traditional management skills:

1. The ability to lead and work with others
2. The ability to converse with technical experts in their applied field
3. The ability to interface with operations, finance, and human resources personnel
4. The ability to participate in strategic and operational planning
5. The ability to mentor, negotiate, and make decisions.

That is some competence profile, but then he gives us some comfort by adding:

While the breadth of project management is indeed wide, the subject really isn't that complex. Failures in project management are more likely to come from trying to take excessive shortcuts than from not mastering the requisite knowledge.

Cherish that thought!

### **What we liked**

While we did read the book from cover to cover to unearth those pearls of Harvey's wisdom, we tended to skip over the well-worn path of scheduling software application and instead dug around for a few gems. For example, we enjoyed being reminded that:

- A pure Functional Organization is a poor model for the execution of projects.<sup>4</sup>
- The more that people participate in the development of a plan, the more likely they are to support it.<sup>5</sup>
- Effective cost management, through the utilization of project management software systems, is an elusive objective.<sup>6</sup> (To this he might have added – the same applies to

corporate accounting systems, because) Frankly, financial managers and project managers are from two different worlds.<sup>7</sup> But [the systems do] have to be connected.<sup>8</sup>

- We can use the project life cycle as one of our work breakdown structures – essentially a phase-oriented WBS.<sup>9</sup> (Now there's a thought to raise the hackles of WBS aficionados!)
- Project management is both an art and a science.<sup>10</sup> (We tend to overlook that.)
- I strongly disagree with Goldratt's policy that we eliminate management by milestones.<sup>11</sup>
- There is a world of difference between *data* and *information*. If the data cannot be arranged in ways to provide insight into projects situations, then it is essentially useless.<sup>12</sup> (The same may be said of reports that reflect only historical information and give no indication of when and where the project will be at its end.)
- (On resource allocation) The project manager is interested in getting the resource on the job that can perform the work up to standards at the lowest cost. The functional manager's emphasis is on getting the maximum applied hours for their staff.<sup>13</sup>
- (On scheduling contingency) My experience has been that as much time can be lost between tasks as in the execution of the tasks themselves.<sup>14</sup>
- (On risk) Wishing that bad things won't happen is almost a sure way of establishing an atmosphere that will breed unwanted events.<sup>15</sup>

Harvey also shares some interesting insights in discussions of these topics:

- Goldratt's critical chain theory and the concept of shared contingency rather than distributed contingency.<sup>16</sup>
- Concepts and issues relating to project budgeting and cost control.<sup>17</sup>
- Using and managing different types of contingency.<sup>18</sup>
- The dangers of establishing real-time status information versus period reporting.<sup>19</sup>
- Thoughts on project portfolio management and enterprise-wide project management,<sup>20</sup> and
- The psychological contract: How to stimulate initiative and innovation in any organization.<sup>21</sup>

## **Downside**

There are very few downsides really, more in the nature of personal obsessions. For example:

- In discussing effective cost management as an elusive objective, Harvey suggests that there are three causes of this failure:<sup>22</sup>
  1. Difficulty of synchronizing the timing for the progress measurements and the cost measurements
  2. Linking the project management systems to the accounting systems
  3. The tendency to set up different measurement categories for the progress and cost

In our view, there are some activity and cost categories that are necessarily measured and applied differently such as overhead and supervision items. Hence the two will never be 100% compatible. In any case, to his list we would like to have seen added:

"Unwillingness to incorporate genuine forecasts to complete." After all, the only thing we can manage (read: influence in the future) is what we expect to happen based on current unaltered trends.

- Harvey wonders where a proposal phase fits into the project life cycle.<sup>23</sup> To us this seems to overlook the potential for breaking down the generic project life span phases into stages. These stages are then specific to the area of project management application, e.g. construction, just as the stages are broken down into activities that are specific to a particular project. In other words, a project life cycle is no more than a high level schedule, before dates are applied.
- Harvey describes various groups of stakeholders as those who care about or impact the project.<sup>24</sup> We suggest that there are also those who, in turn, are impacted by the project and its products. If these are not actually "stakeholders", at least they are "constituents".
- Under the heading "The emergence of project portfolio management" Harvey asks "Is project portfolio management for real? Or is it just a nice sounding phrase, without real substance? . . . I don't see a consensus as to how this emerging concept will play out."<sup>25</sup> Considering that there is remarkably little consensus even within mainstream project management, this is hardly surprising. But to be fair, Harvey goes on to discuss project portfolio management at some length.

So, we beg to disagree on the issue of substance. We think that project portfolio management, or whatever name it masquerades under, is a significantly different and new area of project management knowledge and practice. It has its own special problems and solutions for which satisfactory techniques and tools have yet to emerge. Nevertheless, the problems are real and here today.

### ***Summary***

*Practical Project Management: Tips, Tactics, and Tools* is a valuable work for the insights it contains into the real world of genuine project management. It is written by an author who has obviously been there, done that. This is a very readable book. Highly recommended.

R. Max Wideman  
Fellow, PMI

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, H.A., *Practical Project Management*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., NY, 2002, pp v-vii

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp xv-xvii

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p xiii-xiv

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p14

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p45

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p57

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p159

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p173

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p65

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p74

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p87

- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. p128
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p166
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p182
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. p277
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. Ch 3.2
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. Ch 5.1
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. Ch 6.1
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. Ch 7.2
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid. Sections 9 and 10
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid. Ch 13.5
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p58
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid. p66
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. p126
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. p264