

When does a project actually start? — Part 1

A curious omission in our portrayal of project management practice

Published here July 2020

Introduction

This is a subject that has been on my mind for quite some time. Let me explain.

The English language is very flexible, and different interpretations can be taken away from a simple statement or simple question like "When does a project start?" For example, that question could be interpreted as "When does a project *officially* start?" The answer to this could be when a project mandate is approved, such as in a suitably worded Business Case. Or it could be upon the issuance of a Project Charter, or the signing of a contract, or even an authorization given at an official board meeting and recorded in the minutes.

But before we get into the meaning of this simple question, we should be clear on what we mean by a "project" in the first place. Some current "official" definitions of the term "project" include:

1. PMBOK Guide 6th Edition: "Project. A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result." Note: Since the endeavor is "temporary", it must have a beginning and an end."
2. At this time (2020), PMI's PMBOK Guide 7th Edition is under extensive revision. An early draft circulated includes the same definition of "project" as in the previous edition. It also has this to say: "The temporary nature of projects indicates a beginning and an end to the project work. A project ends in one of two ways: [etc.]" However, there is no mention of how a project gets started, and especially no mention of how it *should* get started!
3. The ISO definition in general states that a project is a: "temporary endeavor created to produce agreed deliverables." Or alternatively, a: "temporary endeavor to achieve one or more defined objectives."
4. A brief trip to the Wideman Comparative Glossary of Project Management¹ and you will find no less than 34 different interpretive nuances of the term "project", almost all of which describe some sort of process, each with significantly more clarification. If you go to my most recent Glossary, you will find around 40 varying definitions of the term "project", many of which touch on the issue of starting the project, but none exactly define it.

However, one of the earliest definitions that appear to be the most relevant is expressed in the original PMBOK 1987 document². This definition commences with:

"Any undertaking *with a defined starting point* and defined objectives . . . [Etc.]"
(Emphasis added.)

An early view

Back to the original question: When does a project actually start? This inquiry might be interpreted as "When does a project *really* start", I mean really get going?" And that could only be when a formal command is given and significant effort is poured into the project, such as upon the signing of a contract for construction in that particular industry.

Indeed, this was a popular view before the days of the Project Management Institute's original PMBOK 1987 document mentioned previously. In those days, academia's view was that a project was only a Project when a contract was signed for the commencement of some serious infrastructure, and then only when digging was commenced for the foundations. Of course a lot of work had to be done before that, such as development of product concepts, planning, financing, concept and then detailed design drawings, estimating, procurement, and so on. But somehow that was not seen as a part of *The Project*, because it was not included in the regular contractor's construction contract.

Today, our view is much broader and covers a much wider spectrum of projects. But even so, there must still be some dedicated effort put into preparation and early decision-making. All of which is why I have put the question: When does a project *actually* start?

I want to get back to the real beginning, that is, the instant before which there was no mention of a particular project, and after which there clearly was evidence of a project. In other words, the very first time when some recorded effort has been applied towards some specific project goal.

Surely such an event is the real starting point of the *Project Life Span*?³

Why bother?

For the past four years I have been contributing to ISO's development of an updated standard for project management. The first edition of *ISO 21500 – Guidance on project management*⁴ was published as an International Standard in September 2012, so its update is now due. This original document had this to say about its project life cycle and how it should start:⁵

"Projects are usually organized into phases that are determined by governance and control needs. These phases should follow a logical sequence, with a start and an end, and should use resources to provide deliverables. In order to manage the project efficiently during the entire project life cycle, a set of activities should be performed in each phase. Project phases are collectively known as the project life cycle.

The project life cycle spans the period from the start of the project to its end . . ."

While this document included a number of diagrams, it did not include a project life cycle⁶ diagram.

However, an early review of this document with a view to extensive updating was held by an ISO working committee in Wels, Austria, February 5 to 16, 2018. For this meeting, a graphic showing the relationships between the *project life cycle* and *Managing the project* was developed and apparently accepted. Throughout subsequent discussions up to the present, it has remained substantially the same. It is shown here as Figure 1.

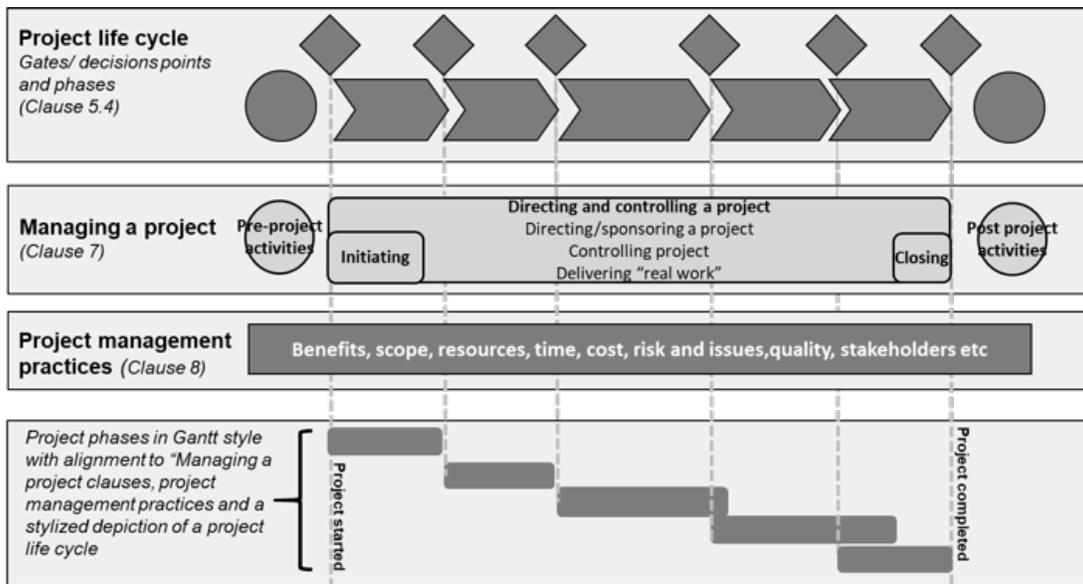


Figure 1: Relationship between project lifecycle and managing a project⁷

What is interesting about this illustration is that it clearly shows the start of the Project life cycle (see vertical line) followed by the first phase of a project titled "Initiating" – as it should. Now "Initiating" is the act of "Committing the organization *to begin a project*"⁸, or begin any of the subsequent phases for that matter, so all is well and good.

Nonetheless, we now find that there is evidently work to be done *before* this project start line, as indicated by the circle marked "Pre-project activities". What these "Pre-project activities" are is not made clear in the document at this point.⁹ Now, it seems to me that while the officially approved start of the project is somewhere as shown by the vertical line, that is not the "actual start" that I am looking for.

Figure 2 shows a similar concept where a *Pre-Project* process group is marked as a *Study* period that delivers a *Project Charter* that is the start of a set of sequential project phases.

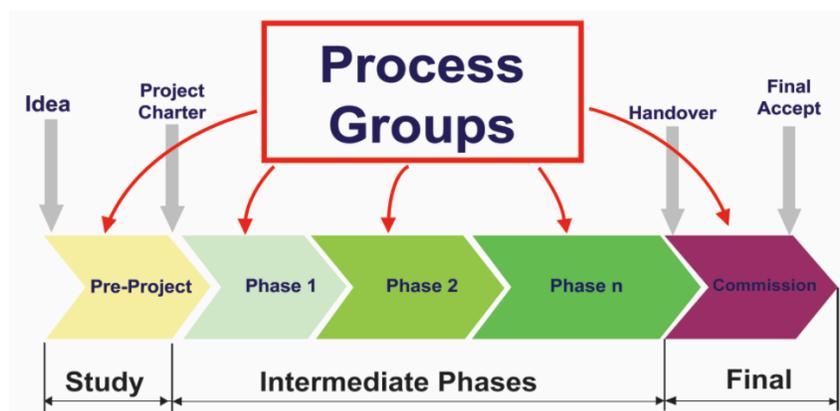


Figure 2: Sequence of project phases made up of process groups¹⁰

Why does all this bother me? Simply put, because I believe that it is at the beginning of these "Pre-project activities" that is the real starting point of a project's so-called "Front End".¹¹ So why is this so important? Because it is alleged that many project failures can be sourced to poor judgment or even outright mistakes made in the "Front end".

There is an old saying: "If you want to end right, you have to start right!"

A particular graphic that I am greatly drawn to is one found in a presentation published by Planning Planet describing one of their training modules on project controls.¹²

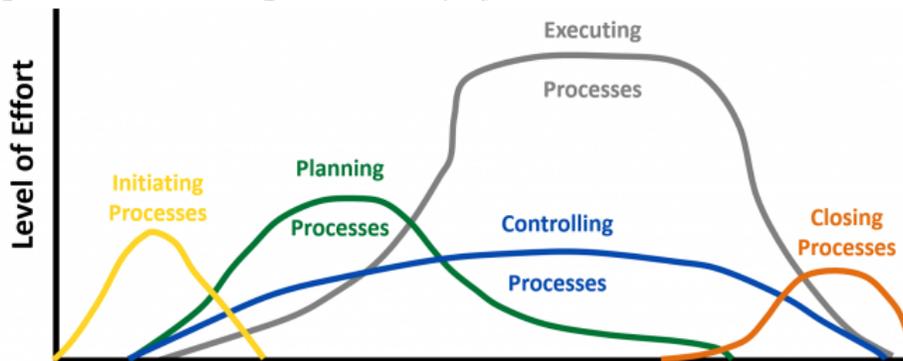


Figure 3: Project Life Span

As you can see, the diagram shows conceptually how the five basic production processes are distributed through the life span of a typical project. Most importantly, for this discussion, is the Initiating Process shown colored yellow and how it pre-cedes all other processes. In other words, it sticks out at the front end and presumably represents all those so-called "pre-project activities" that so many fearlessly discard from the main project management responsibilities that follow the "official" start date.

These pre-project activities may be assumed to be those such as:

- Justifying the official start of the project in the form of a document such as a proposal, project brief, or preliminary business case;
- Identifying the project sponsor and project leader, and their respective responsibilities;
- Establishing authorities and project governance generally;
- Verifying that resources are available in terms of staff, time and money.

When I ask the question: "When does a project actually start?" - it is at the very beginning of that yellow line that I am interested in. Why? Because, in my view, professional project management calls for the full attention to its components of scope, quality, time, cost and risk, especially time and cost right from the beginning. If that is true, then the very beginning of that yellow line is the basic point of origin of these management activities.

Anything less is project management defrauded.

A question to Tom Mochal

While this matter has been on my mind for some time, it has received a lot of project management attention. Indeed, if you Google "When does a project start?" you will get a response of over four billion! And guess what, as one of the earliest amongst a reported 4,000,000,000 responses you could get this: [Max's Musings - When Does a Project Really Start \(and Finish\)](#). That link takes you to a Musings on my web site that recounts a discussion I once had with Tom Mochal¹³ on this exact topic. And that was ten years ago.

Tom's advice was sweeping as you will see if you visit that page. He listed and described each of the

following potential dates:

- When the idea is generated;
- When a budget is approved;
- When a project manager is assigned;
- When the project charter¹⁴ is approved;
- When the project kickoff meeting is to be held.

But, as I pointed out at the time, most of these potential "go" dates occur as a result of some upper management's action and, as such, each supposed official start date could come and go without any actual project progress being made.

So why does the subject still bother me? Because I am looking for that illusive instant in time when the first work in pursuit of a project objective actually begins. That is regardless of official dates set by management, business cases, project charters, plans and schedules, political implications or sheer accident. In this vein, Tom expressed the following opinion:

"To a certain extent, you might think that it doesn't really matter when the project starts. Having a somewhat undefined start date does not take away from the fact that the work is a project. It's obvious that the project did start at some point, since there was a point when the work was not in progress and a point where the work is in progress. So, at some point the project did in fact "start".¹⁵

When asked why he thought the Project Start Date is important, Tom provided this insight:

"The reason it is important to know the start date is that there may be consequences and incentives based on how long it takes to complete a project. The following are examples of these consequences:

- Project team accountability;
- Process improvement;
- Financial & accounting forecasting and records;
- Comparisons with other companies."

Tom added:

"All projects have a start date. But knowing exactly when a project starts is something that companies simply define differently."¹⁶

All of that is well and good, but not exactly what I am looking for. I am not looking for some arbitrary fiat of upper management that happens to suit some strategy or other. I am trying to identify the point in a project life span when effort is first applied to pursuing the objective of a particular project.

Conceptually, a project obviously has a start and an end date. In other words, "start", as well as "end" are fundamental parts of the concept of managing projects. If that is true, then surely there should be some way of establishing an unequivocal definition of the act of starting a project – something embedded in genuine professional project management practice, especially when it comes to asserting best practices.

Why does it matter?

Case in point: There was a time when I was associated with a large project to build and commence operation of a large industrial production plant. Eventually, towards the end of the project, I was left with the task of finalizing the loose ends – the cost of all of which was charged to the project budget.

Nevertheless, the team congratulated itself on completing the whole works within the allocated budget.

Sometime later, the project's accountants came around to tidying up their bookkeeping, and intent upon optimizing the records for purposes of determining the tax amount claimable on Capital Investment. In discussion with those tax authorities, they found that certain charges at the "front end" could be included, such as the cost of work required to prepare the project's justification (Business Case). Even though I suspect this work was not included in the original budget, it consequently resulted in a final total cost that significantly exceeded that budget.

From then on, the project was considered less of a success (from the essential financial perspective) because, in the last analysis, it ended up showing a cost overrun.

An aside

Interestingly, in a high profile meeting of prominent project managers held a few months back, the selection of appropriate terms came up for inclusion in a new project management document. At that meeting it was agreed that the word "start"¹⁷ should not be used. Instead, the term "initiate"¹⁸ should be used as being more appropriate.¹⁹ I am not sure that everyone will be aware of the implications of this subtlety.

Next month in Part 2 of this paper, I shall describe my efforts to try again to find an answer to my original question: *When does a project actually start?*

¹ For the popular definitions of "project", go to the Wideman Comparative Glossary of Project Management Terms v5.5 see this page: http://www.maxwideman.com/pmglossary/PMG_P12.htm#Project

² See <http://www.maxwideman.com/PMBOK1987reborn/intro.htm>

³ Or **Project Life Cycle** if you prefer.

⁴ Currently under review as ISO 21502.

⁵ First edition of *ISO International Standard 21500*, 2012-09-01, page 8.

⁶ Also known as a *project life span*.

⁷ Graphic produced for conference in Wels, February, 2017, titled *Figure 5 Relationship between project lifecycle, managing a project and project management practices* found in document: *ISO 21500 Annotated Outline Consolidated Clean v3 18-09-14*. A somewhat similar example is shown in the UK HM Government document *Introducing the Project Delivery Standard: A Guide to using the Project Delivery Standard*, Version 1.1 issued July 14, 2017, page 13.

⁸ See http://www.maxwideman.com/pmglossary/PMG_I02.htm

⁹ However, what is interesting to note is that the author of this graphic does not consider these Pre-project activities to be "real work". As shown, that description only applies to the five phases within the Project life cycle.

¹⁰ Found at <https://i2.wp.com/blog.sukad.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Figure-16.jpg>

¹¹ That part of the project life span that is at the very beginning, or even just before, Wideman Comparative Project Management Glossary v6.1 item D02797.

¹² Planning Planet, Guild of Project Controls Compendium and Reference (CaR), training module 01.0 first published on line November 2, 2015, by PP Admin, section 01.1.2.2.03.

<http://www.planningplanet.com/guild/gpccar/introduction-to-managing-project-controls>

¹³ Tom Mochal is President of TenStep, Inc., a company focused on methodology development, training and consulting. He is an expert instructor and consultant on project management.

¹⁴ Other documents with similar intent could be included here, such as: Project Business Case; Project Initiation Document (PID); Statement of Work; or some form of Contract Document.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The term "start" is interesting in that it is generally recognized in dictionaries as a verb, e.g., to get something

going. Whereas we may use the word as a noun to refer to the point in time when something actually gets going.

¹⁸ The term "initiate" is a verb, the corresponding noun is the word "initiation". According to Merriam-Webster, "Initiation" may be defined as: "Cause something to begin", which is rather broader than just "get going". In project management practice, Initiation implies "do what ever it takes" to get something going, and hence is the real first phase of a project's life span.

¹⁹ According to ISO/TC 258 WG9 – Project Management Meeting Minutes #13 Seoul, item 12.10.