

The Elusive Concept of a Project

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One would expect that, after 60 years, the project management profession would have a pretty good definition of a project, and how to determine if it was successful. Evidently we don't.

The International Organisation for Standardization (ISO) has published ISO 21500: Guidance on Project Management, which is a high level global project management framework. And guess what gave its members sleepless nights? - defining a project and how to measure its success.

The problem with "projects" is that they cover a wide range of endeavors from a student studying to pass an examination, to a huge team of professionals planning and executing a complex eight-year megaproject to stage the Olympic Games.

Both endeavors would be classified as projects (the Olympics would rather be a program) if tested against the definitions of two eminent organisations. The Project Management Institute (PMI): "A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result", or the Association for Project Management (APM): "A project is a unique, transient endeavour undertaken to achieve a desired outcome."

Even making a cup of coffee would qualify as a project using the above definitions. Clearly this is an unsatisfactory situation. It was suggested by a member of the ISO 21500 team that a better definition could be "A project is an endeavor, undertaken by a temporary team, to create a new or changed product, service or result." This would exclude studying to pass an exam or making a cup of coffee, as they do not involve setting up a temporary team. In a business context this would be valid as it would be highly unusual to find a single resource project.

However, the suggested definition implies that a project cannot be undertaken by only one person, unless you can have a one-person team. Wikipedia defines a team as "... a group of people or animals linked in a common purpose. Teams are especially appropriate for conducting tasks that are high in complexity and have many interdependent subtasks. A group in itself does not necessarily constitute a team. Teams normally have members with complementary skills and generate synergy through a coordinated effort which allows each member to maximize his or her strengths and minimize his or her weaknesses". In a business context this would be valid as it would be highly unusual to find a single resource project. ISO have settled on the following definition of a project: A project consists of a unique set of processes consisting of coordinated and controlled activities with start and end dates, performed to achieve project objectives.

However, for PMP exam purposes the PMBOK definition of a project still stands as "A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result".