

IMPROVEMENT SKILLS CONSULTING LTD.

“Simply, improvement...”



Project Initiation:
Keeping it simple!

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“We try to fall behind in our projects as soon as we can. That way, we have longer to catch up.. [Anon.]”

Designed to fail?

Why is it that so many organisations fail to set up their change and improvement projects in a way that improves the chances of delivering something useful?

We’ve worked with numerous clients and been asked to help get projects kicked off effectively, or get them back on track after they’ve stalled. Often it’s the simplest elements of setting up a Project that cause the most confusion.

Most organisations these days have a project methodology, or lifecycle model, that they use to run projects. In the public sector PRINCE2 is popular, but there are plenty of other perfectly good models.

All these models typically take projects through lifecycle stages that include:

-  Initiation – setting up the project at its inception
-  Definition – creating a clear statement of what needs to be achieved, by when, with what resources
-  Planning – detailed development of plans (time, resources, quality requirements)
-  Implementation – the “doing” stage
-  Close-out – wrapping up the project and transferring solutions to “business as usual”
-  Review – identifying learning points to build into future projects

In this article we want to focus on some of the basics to help ensure a project is initiated successfully.

Let's set up a project!

Those who come up with the bright idea for a project may not be the people who have to run it and deliver solutions. So, the ability to turn the bright idea into something that can be run as a project (by someone else) is a critical stage.

It's not unusual to need two separate stages of "Initiation" and "Definition", unless there is sufficient information available right at the start for a clear definition to be produced. You might know the initiation stage document as a Project Charter, Project Mandate, or Terms of Reference. For the purposes of this article we will refer to it as a Project Initiation Document (PID). The more detail you can provide, the more likely it is to be a Project Definition Document. In some ways the name doesn't matter: it's not about filling in forms, it's about being clear about what the project has to achieve.

At this stage, you need clarity and focus. A 20 page PID is not going to be read by many people and, in our experience, it's likely that project sponsors or managers will be too confused by excessive project jargon to produce anything of value. Here's what you need and some examples of where people go wrong.

Project Objectives:

Write a one line statement (or a few concise bullets) that specifies what the project is trying to achieve. Objectives should begin with the word "To..."; e.g.

-  To reduce time to respond to complaints by 50%, by November 2008
-  To increase income by £50k, by 31/03/09

Ideally, they should be SMART, or be capable of being made SMART once further definition work has been done. SMART = Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound. If you can track achievement against the objective on a graph, then it's probably a SMART objective.

The don't contain words such as "*optimise*", "*maximise*", "*minimise*" and they don't have deadlines such as "*Autumn*" or "*Quarter 3*". They certainly aren't "*ongoing*".

They should **not** describe what you plan to do, how you plan to do it, or what you plan to produce.

The only type of project where you probably cannot write a SMART objective is a scoping, or feasibility project, where the aim is to deliver a recommendation or report.

So, objectives must define desired benefits, outcomes or performance improvements that you expect from the project. What you need to measure on your project will naturally fall out of the definition of good objectives.

What's the problem?

Sometimes, a good place to start on a PID is a definition of the organisational problem you are trying to solve. It can be easier than going straight to objective setting. Identify the current performance issues that have caused the project to be initiated in the first place. Not all projects set out to solve problems, so if you're working on an opportunity, describe that instead.

You can then use these statements to focus on setting SMART objectives (what would "good" look like?).

Project Deliverables:

These may also be called "outputs" or "products". Too many Project Initiation Documents specify Deliverables as their objectives. Deliverables are only produced in order to enable achievement of the objectives.

An objective "To implement a new xyz IT system" is not an objective. What is the expected organisational benefit here? If you can see it, feel it, file it, trip over it, or put it on a shelf, it's probably a deliverable, not an objective! You won't be able to draw it on a graph.

Many IT and Facilities projects suffer from having deliverables expressed as objectives. The result is that the focus of the project is on delivering "stuff", rather than improving organisational performance.

One PID that I saw in a public sector organisation only had one deliverable listed: "A PID". That rather misses the point, doesn't it, and suggests an obsession with "process", rather than achievement.

A Sponsor:

Every project should have a single, named individual as a Sponsor. Their role is to be a champion for the project, set its overall direction and to help unblock any problems. The Sponsor may also represent the project at any governance groups (Project Board, Steering Group).

Without a Sponsor, you may struggle to get the support of senior stakeholders or to engage those who need to be actively involved.

Project Manager:

Who will lead the project on a day-to-day basis?

At the initiation stage you may not know who will be on the project team; often that will be a task for the Project Manager to work through, with agreement if necessary from the Sponsor and Steering Group.

Stakeholder Analysis:

At the PID stage, an initial identification of the project's stakeholders is useful to identify those who are likely to be supportive and those who might be less positive. Categorising stakeholders on a *Power and Interest Matrix* will help focus on who is really important and requires one-to-one engagement, who needs to be kept happy and who simply needs to be kept informed.

Remember, stakeholders' views change as the project progresses and new ones may emerge, so Stakeholder Analysis should not be a one-off initiation stage activity.

Timescales:

Define the start and end dates for the project. You may also want to identify any known Milestones – key points in time at which something either needs to have finished, or be ready to start.

Scope:

One of the potential problems with projects is that the scope may “creep” as different stakeholders ask for different, or additional, features of the outputs. Scope may be specified in terms of:

-  Geography (e.g. sites, offices, locations)
-  Products, services or processes
-  People (e.g. grade, role)

It's usually helpful to define, based on early discussions with key stakeholders both what is in scope and what is out of scope. Agreeing what is out of scope helps you to manage expectations about what the project won't actually deliver.

Risks:

At the initiation stage it's unlikely that much more than a few high-level (and obvious) risks can be identified and flagged up with any associated mitigating actions. The Project Manager and team will need to carry out a more rigorous Risk Analysis later.

Resources:

If there is a fixed budget known at this stage, ensure it is recorded. More likely, there will only be an indicative budget which will need to be firmed up and agreed later.

Identify any other specific resource requirements such as equipment, facilities or people that may be required during the project.

Assumptions:

If you've made any assumptions, write them down. They will help readers of the PID understand some of the rationale for what you're proposing. They can be tested and revised later.

Project Initiation Document	
Project Name:	
Project Objectives:	
Problem to be solved (or opportunity):	
Project Deliverables:	Scope (inside/outside):
Assumptions:	Key Stakeholders:
Project Sponsor:	Project Manager:
Team Members:	
Key Milestones:	Date:
Risks:	
Budget, Resources or Constraints:	
Project Approval Date:	
Signed:	

The KISS Principle:

KISS = Keep it simple, stupid. Writing a PID should follow that principle and it's clearly a case of "less is more".

The aim should be to get a clear statement of what the project needs to achieve, with what resources, by when. This should be in a format that aids understanding and enables those who may need to approve the project to have the information they need, concisely.

Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to improve their project management processes and skills for nearly two decades. We've developed practical and effective project processes for a wide range of clients. Our support includes project process design, project facilitation and skill transfer/capability development.

We are not wedded to a particular methodology. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to develop and improve your project capabilities.

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