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Project Objectives – A Confused Concept

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ABSTRACT
Project objectives are a core concept within the field of project management. This paper reports research findings that attempts to identify understandings of the term ‘project objectives’. Firstly, a review is undertaken of key project management literature pertaining to the concept of project objectives. Secondly, a survey is conducted of 37 members of the project management community. The research highlights a myriad of definitions of the term ‘project objectives’. The most common definition is that project objectives refers to the time and cost objectives of the project. However, there is some support for distinct alternative interpretations, namely that project objectives refers to the deliverables of the project, or to the project’s benefits. It is concluded that the project team needs to have a consistent understanding of project objectives to avoid miscommunication. Alternatively, the term ‘project objectives’ should be avoided and less ambiguous terms used, such as deliverables, benefits and time and cost objectives

KEYWORDS
project objectives, PMBOK®, logical framework method

INTRODUCTION
Many definitions of ‘project’ are in terms of achieving project objectives. For example, Field & Keller (1998) describe a project as 'organised work towards a pre-defined goal or objective” The British Standards Institution (2000) characterises a project as “undertaken to achieve an objective”. A project’s end is reached when the project objectives have been achieved; or when the project is terminated because its objectives will not or cannot be met (PMI, 2008). Definitions of the project management process also utilise the concept of project objectives. For example, project management is managing “processes and people in the pursuit of achieving project objectives” (Pinto & Kharbanda 1995). Similarly, project management is the management of “resources for a relatively short-term objective” (Kerzner, 2003), and "project management teaches that to achieve the desired project objective one must go through a specific process"" (Morris, 1988).
An ‘objective’ is something towards which work is to be directed (PMI, 2008). Dictionary definitions of ‘objective’ include (dictionary.com, 2010): “something that one’s efforts or actions are intended to attain or accomplish; purpose; goal; target”. So, at its most fundamental meaning, an objective is something that is an end being worked towards through a set of means. Project objectives have been defined as the ‘results to be achieved through the performance of a project’ (Portny et al., 2008). This broad sense of ‘objective’ as being a target could result in ‘project objective’ having differing interpretations.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**
The potential lack of consistent understanding of the key concept as ‘project objectives’ can lead to miscommunication between project stakeholders and consequent mismanagement of their expectations. This suggests that research into the project management community’s understanding of the important concept of ‘project objectives’ is worthwhile in order to identify common or diverse interpretations. So the research objective is to investigate whether there is a common understanding of the core project management of ‘project objectives’ in the literature and in the project management community. Furthermore, if there is a common interpretation, what is it?; and is there are conflicting interpretations, what are they and is there a dominant paradigm?

**KEY LITERATURE** (note: underlining is author’s emphasis)
*Guide to Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®) (PMI, 2008)*
The subject of a project management body of knowledge is of such importance that the *International Journal of Project Management* devoted a complete issue - Vol 13, No. 2, April 1995 - to this topic. In August 1987 PMI published The *Guide to Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®)* and revised in 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008. PMBOK® is an American National Standard (ANSI 99-001-2008) and there are over 3 million copies in circulation. It is one of the most influential texts in defining the project management process. So, if one is seeking to analyse the definition of the term ‘project objectives’, one logical source would be PMBOK.

For such a key concept as ’project objectives’, it would be expected that PMBOK® would provided a definition and a consistent and clear understanding of the concept. Its glossary does not define ‘project objectives’ but does define ‘objective’ as “something toward which work is to be directed” (PMI, 2008). It acknowledges that a project’s end is reached when the project’s objectives have been achieved; or when the project is terminated because its objectives will not or cannot be met (PMI, 2008). PMBOK®’s
emphasis on the primacy of project objectives is evidenced when its states that the project manager is responsible for “accomplishing a project’s objectives”

**Project Objectives - deliverables and requirements**

Gray & Larson (2008) define project objectives in terms of the project’s deliverables, for example project objectives could be an apartment complex or software package. PMBOK® (PMI, 2008) notes the project manager is responsible for “delivering a project’s objectives within scope, schedule, cost and quality”. This implies that ‘project objectives’ are synonymous with project deliverables. PMBOK® notes that ‘all projects have a purpose or objective … where the objective is a service or result’. This again reinforces the interpretation that project objectives refer to project deliverables, because PMBOK® defines a deliverable, inter alia, as a service or result.

PMBOK® states that the work breakdown structure is “a deliverable-orientated hierarchical decomposition of the work to be executed by the project team to accomplish the project objectives and create the required deliverables”. Confusingly, PMBOK® now seems to imply that project objectives and deliverables are two separate concepts i.e. deliverables lead to the accomplishment of project objectives. This confusion begins to reveal a lack of clear definition for the core project management concept of ‘project objectives’ within one of the most influential texts in the field of project management.

Deliverables have requirements. Requirements can be defined as a condition or capability that must be met or possessed by a project deliverable to satisfy a contract, specification, standard, or other formally imposed document (PMI, 2008). A requirement is something the deliverable must do or the quality it must have (Robertson & Robertson, 2006). So where project objectives are interpreted as defining the deliverables, then the project objectives should also encompass the requirements of these deliverables. However, PMBOK® seems to suggest that the concept of project objectives does not encompass the requirements of the deliverables. It states that project management “often requires tradeoffs among project requirements and objectives”, thereby implying that requirements are a separate concept to project objectives.

Similarly, PMBOK® notes that requirements management should trace “requirements to project objectives”, again implying that requirements and project objectives (i.e. deliverables) are separate concepts. The collection of requirements is described by PMBOK® as the “process of defining and documenting stakeholders’ needs to meet the project objectives”, yet again implying that requirements and project objectives (deliverables) are separate concepts. Finally, and somewhat confusingly, PMBOK® then seems to suggest that project objectives and requirements are synonymous: “clear descriptions of the project objectives are developed, including the reasons why a specific
project is the best alternative to satisfy the requirements. In summary, one definition of the concept of project objectives is that it refers to the project deliverables and, perhaps, the requirements of these deliverables.

**Project objectives - time, cost, quality/ performance**

PMBOK® (PMI, 2008) states that project objectives “can include scope, schedule, cost, or performance”. The prevalence of project objectives being defined in terms of three components - cost, time and quality/performance (e.g. Meredith & Mantel, 2006) – has led them to be commonly referred the ‘triple constraints’ or ‘iron triangle’ (Atkinson, 1999). Many definitions of project management are expressed in terms of these three project objectives e.g. achieve the project objectives on time, and to the specified cost, quality and performance” (British Standards Institution (2000). PRINCE2 (OGC, 2009) defines project objectives as ‘time cost, quality, scope, risk, and benefit performance goals”. So, in summary, there is a interpretation in the literature of project objectives referring to the time, cost and quality objectives.

**Project objectives – stakeholder satisfaction**

Project stakeholders are individuals and organizations who are actively involved in the project, or whose interests may be positively or negatively affected as a result of project execution or successful project completion (PMI, 2008). Project success can be measured in terms of the degree of achievement of project objectives (Belout, 1998). So stakeholder satisfaction could be viewed as a project objective - “The triple constraint has been accepted wisdom throughout much of the profession for decade. In the past several years, however, this unholy trinity has frequently been joined to a fourth constraint - stakeholder satisfaction” (PMI, 1998). Tuman (1986) observes that “The days when we could define success in terms of cost, schedule and technical objectives are gone. We must address a much wider range of needs, concerns and issues which are presented to us by a diverse mix of project stakeholders”. Therefore project objectives can be defined as achieving stakeholder satisfaction.

**Logical Framework Method (LFM)**

The Logical Framework Method (LFM) represents a school of thought that provides a more expansive interpretation of the concept of project objectives. USAID (US Agency for International Development) developed LFM in 1970 to improve project management of international development projects and accountability to Congress. LFM uses a top-down approach to formulate a ‘hierarchy of project objectives’ such that at any given level the lower project objectives are the means to satisfying the next higher level of
project objectives. The LFM hierarchy of project objectives can be decomposed as follows:

**Project objective - strategic alignment**

All projects arise from a need to fulfil specific strategic objectives (Turner, 2009). The sponsoring organisation’s strategic plans provide the rationale for the project, so strategic alignment is one level of project objectives. The strategic alignment articulates the strategic rationale behind the project and describes long-term impact of the project.

**Project Objective – Benefits.** Benefits are another form of project objective. Benefits are the required change realised by using the project deliverables. As benefits are often only realised after the project has been completed, it is easy for projects to focus solely on creating the project deliverables (OGC, 2009). The project benefits can be a hard (e.g. financial) and/or a soft (e.g., satisfaction). The project benefits provide the means towards the strategic goal and determine the required project deliverables. The project should not include deliverables that do not enable benefits to be achieved (OGC 2009).

**Project objective – deliverables**

Deliverables are another form of project objective. The project deliverable is any unique and verifiable product, result, or capability to perform a service (PMI, 2008). Deliverables must meet prescribed requirements.

**Project objective – process**

The process refers to the resource inputs and clusters of key project tasks required to deliver the deliverables. The project process should be conducted in a quality manner e.g. no rework, happy team, efficient use of resources. Project objectives can compass consideration of how efficiently a project process has been managed (Baccarini, 1999). ISO 10006 (2003) provides a good example of quality aspects of the project management process. So, project objectives can be defined as undertaking the project process in a quality manner.

In summary, this brief review of the literature pertaining to the concept of project objectives highlights a diverse range of interpretations. Project objectives could refer to:

- traditional iron triangle of time, cost and product quality; or,
- deliverables and perhaps its requirements; or,
- quality of the project process; or,
- to a wider scale of interpretation that encompasses the project benefits and strategic alignment.
This diversity of meanings for the concept of project objectives suggests that research into the project management community’s understanding of the important concept of ‘project objectives’ is worthwhile.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Survey

A survey was conducted in July 2010 at an Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) seminar. AIPM claims to be the premier body for project management in Australia (AIPM Strategic Plan, 2010-2015). The author was the seminar presenter and the advertised topic was “Project Objectives- What are they?” Prior to making the presentation, the audience were given the following survey question: “Think of one project you are presently or recently worked on – What were two project objectives?” The participants were not provided with any definition of the term ‘project objectives’. 37 completed surveys were returned. All stated two project objectives. One respondent recorded three objectives.

Content analysis was used to analyse the responses. Content analysis is a documentary method that aims at a qualitative and/or quantitative analysis of various forms of existing data like verbal, visual and written communication. It can be used as a quantitative technique to determine time, frequency or duration of an event. It aims at studying the content of the documents. (Grinnell and Unrau 2010). Content that is visible, straight and obvious involving counting frequencies of appearance of the research unit is called manifest content; and content that has an underlying meaning and messages that are inferred or hidden, which need to be registered is called latent content. (Sarantakos 1998) This research uses content analysis to study both manifest and latent content. A qualitative approach is used to analyse and record the latent content by reading between lines and registering the implied meanings; and a quantitative approach is used to analyse and record the manifest content in the form of frequency tables to present the ranking of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants were asked one demographic question – what industry do you work in: engineering/construction/property; or other (please state). 31 worked in engineering/construction/property; 3 in IT; and 3 in consulting. So, overwhelming, the research sample were from the engineering/construction/property industry. Content analysis was conducted and the literature was used to provide a structure for categorising
responses. Tables 1 and 2 record the 75 responses from the 37 respondents in five categories derived from the literature.

Table 1 – Project objectives: detailed responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TCQ (Total 42)</th>
<th>Deliverable (15)</th>
<th>Benefits (10)</th>
<th>Project Process (5)</th>
<th>Stakeholder (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• time (19)</td>
<td>• promote product</td>
<td>• profitability (2)</td>
<td>• develop team skills</td>
<td>• stakeholder satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• budget (18)</td>
<td>• sustainable infrastructure</td>
<td>• maintain client relationship</td>
<td>• minimise variations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• quality (5)</td>
<td>• new energy analysis tools</td>
<td>• future client opportunities</td>
<td>• safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An overall reading of the results indicate that there exists a diverse range of interpretations of the concept of project objectives. This was also reflected in the literature where, for example, PMBOK®(PMI, 2008) presented alternative interpretations and the LFM provided a more expansive elucidation of the concept of project objectives. The survey responses indicate a similarly wide variety of understandings from the traditional time-cost-quality iron triangle through to business benefits.
Time/cost/quality

It is perhaps not surprising that the most common understanding of project objectives is in terms of the typical objectives of time, cost and quality/performance (56% response rate). In particular there is strong interpretation of project objectives in terms of delivering on time and within budget. It is possibly not unexpected that project quality had a low frequency of response (5) as a project objective, because the project objective of quality is more difficult to define than time and cost - "a project is said to be successful if the work is finished to time, to cost and to quality ... but very few people understand what they mean by good quality in the context of projects" (Turner, 2009).

Deliverable

The results show that 20% of respondents define project objectives in terms of what the project will deliver e.g. disaster recovery facility, land sub-division. This matches one of PMBOK’s perspective that project objectives refers to project deliverables. It does seem unnecessarily confusing that as definitions of ‘deliverable’ are relatively consistent in the literature - e.g. PMBOK® defines ‘deliverable’ in its glossary - that some people use the more vague term of project objectives to mean deliverables. As the term deliverable is clear and unambiguous, then when one is describing a deliverable, it would seem desirable that it be labelled as a deliverable and not as a project objective.

Benefits

The results show that 13% of respondents define project objectives in terms of the benefits realised by using the project deliverables e.g. reduce energy consumption, improved efficiency. Deliverables are produced by the project process to achieve business benefits. This interpretation of project objectives is a higher level, sponsor or user oriented perspective Benefits should be specified by the users of the deliverables (OGC, 2009). One possible reason for the relatively low number of respondents defining project objectives as benefits could be that they are the producers of deliverables (eg engineers, construction contractors) rather than the ultimate users. This could result to a producer-oriented perspective of delivering projects to time and cost, and less of a sponsor/user perspective that is focused more on post-project benefits realisation. The term ‘benefits’ is consistently defined in the literature such that it has led to the creation of a project process named ‘benefits management’. This suggests that as the term benefit is commonly understood and entrenched within the benefits management process, then when one is describing a benefit, it should be labelled as a benefit and not as the more vague term of project objective.
Project process

The results show that only 7% of respondents define project objectives in terms of the processes undertaken during the project. E.g. develop team skills, minimise variations. This process perspective for project objectives focuses upon the how efficiently the project is managed and refers to the quality of the project management process (e.g. ISO 10006). A high number of respondents did not view the achievement of an efficient quality project process as a project objective so this suggests an opportunity to raise the awareness of this possible project objective within the project management community.

Stakeholder satisfaction

Interestingly, only three respondents viewed stakeholder satisfaction as a project objective. The survey results suggest that the respondents, who are representatives of the project management community, are strongly locked onto a traditional perspective project objectives. It could be implied that where respondents stated project objectives in terms of meeting time, cost and quality objectives or deliverables or benefits, that by inference successfully achieving these project objectives should result in stakeholder satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

Project objectives are a core concept within the field of project management and prevent within the literature. However, it would found that the literature has a variety of interpretations of this concept. The survey results clearly show a diverse range of meanings for the core project management concept of ‘project objectives’. This suggests that when the project team and stakeholders are discussing project objectives, it would be prudent for the project manager to set out a definition of project objectives in order to avoid miscommunication and misaligned expectations.

To extend this further, a strong case could be made that the nebulous term ‘project objectives’ should not be used in any project management documentation and more apparent terms such as time/cost/quality objectives, project deliverables and benefits should be used. Not only should this avoid misunderstandings but also provide clearer thinking and focus when project objectives are articulated within project management plans. This should then prevent any project objectives section of project management plans contain a mishmash of intertwined diverse concepts of deliverables, requirements, time/cost/quality, process quality, and stakeholder satisfaction criteria. If each of these aforementioned project objectives are kept separately within project management plans, all concerned will benefits by a more apparent articulation of what is being described.
REFERENCES
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