

Chapter 2

The Nature of Project Work

This chapter provides a brief overview of project work and its distinctive features. It looks at the important role of teamwork and at the relationship between time, cost and quality in project work, as well as taking account of risk factors.

What is a project?

All projects share one determining set of characteristics: they are the combination of new ideas and activities in a wholly unique and novel endeavour. This means that the path from conception to realisation can never be foreseen with total accuracy. Before we begin, we will need to plan carefully and predict major difficulties, but there will always be unexpected problems that have to be dealt with.

Projects can come in all shapes and sizes. Here are some examples:

- Organising an international conference
- Building the Great Pyramid
- Marketing a new brand of chocolate
- Designing Concorde
- Building a new hotel
- Conquering Gaul
- Moving to new office accommodation
- Mounting a recruitment drive

What links all these is that they each constitute a unique endeavour with a clear goal. As such, they also have a clear beginning and a definite end.

As you can see, projects are often complex undertakings, combining the skills of different sets of people and organisations and drawing on a whole range of materials and resources. This calls for particular skills in managing - having a clear and consistent vision of the goal of the undertaking, organising tasks, people and resources effectively, foreseeing risks and problems and evolving strategies for dealing with them - in order that the project can be completed successfully.

Although there are common elements, managing a project differs in important respects from managing an ongoing organisation in, say, a service or manufacturing industry. There energies are focused on maintaining or refining what is essentially a continuing activity - running a transport system, selling clothes, assembling cars. Projects, however, are one-off activities. No two are ever entirely alike.

It will be clear from the list above that working on projects is not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the analytic approach to thinking about projects and the development of sets of skills and techniques associated specifically with project management. These sets of sometimes highly sophisticated and technical procedures have been developed principally over the past 60 years, particularly in the areas of construction, civil engineering and defence systems. Whilst some of the detailed techniques may not be relevant to the size and scope of

projects we are concerned with here, the underlying concepts and approaches can be extremely useful.

Trade unions and transnational European projects

Few of the project examples we've quoted so far in this chapter have much to do with trade unions and none is concerned with transnational education and training. Before we go any further, then, let's offer a few examples that are more specifically oriented to trade union education:

- A three-year project, involving six trade union organisations from three different European countries, to design and deliver six innovative training modules for young unemployed people
- A two year project, with six trade union organisations and an external consultant, examining the role of trade union officers in different countries, moving from an analysis of occupational functions to the formulation of training needs at a national level, and exploring the possibility of establishing common standards and programmes at a European level
- A two year project involving nine national trade union training organisations, five European industry federations, the European Trade Union College and two universities, to explore the use of information society tools to enable partners to participate more effectively in social dialogue and support the process of adaptation to the new economy
- A project, bringing together a European trade union institution, a university department and two small businesses, to produce an interactive computer-based training package on health and safety at work
- A two-year project conducting research and providing information on teleworking, coordinated by a trade union research organisation and involving various university departments, employers, city authorities, research institutes and consultants in six countries.

These are just some of the quite diverse range of projects in which trade union organisations have collaborated in recent years at a European level. And, of course, this handbook originated as one of the products of another such transnational project.

We will be drawing on the experiences of these and other projects to illustrate various points later in the handbook. They may also provide some ideas of what kinds of collaboration have proved feasible in the past and act as a stimulus for new initiatives in the future. At the same time, however, it is important not to be limited by the ideas of others – in the mistaken belief that emulation is safer than innovation.

Project phases

Although each project will be unique and have its own distinctive trajectory, most projects follow a similar sequence of major phases:

- First, there is the initial stage of conception - having the initial idea, defining the goals of the project, identifying the key team members, planning a schedule and budget.
- Next, there is often a user needs analysis - researching in more detail the situation and specific needs of the people who will be using the product or service which the project aims to develop.
- Then there is usually a design stage, where the detailed planning of the final product takes place - be it an office block, a computer database, an advertising campaign or a seminar.
- Then comes the implementation phase, when the results of the design stage are realised - the office block is constructed, the database is programmed and tested, the campaign is launched and the seminar takes place.

For some projects the implementation phase may represent the conclusion, but for many there will be supplementary phases which are likely to vary according to the nature of the project:

- For the office block there will be a commissioning phase, as the building is handed over to the client and brought into use.
- For the database, too, there is likely to be a commissioning phase, as well as a maintenance process.
- The outcomes of the advertising campaign are likely to be analysed in an evaluation phase.
- The seminar, too, will be evaluated and its major conclusions may need to be more generally publicised in a dissemination phase.
- And for many projects there will also be an exploitation phase, where the products of the pilot projects are developed further and brought within the mainstream activities of the organisation.

This, though, represents only a broad outline structure of the stages through which a project may pass and each will need to be broken down into a much more detailed set of activities and tasks before the real business of managing the project can begin.

Key elements

Managing the project - however it is achieved - involves coordinating four key elements:

- The project team
- The product performance or quality
- The time scale
- The cost

in order to realise the original goals of the project. The first of these elements - the team - calls for skills in understanding and managing people, while the other three are principally concerned with the material aspects of the project. All, however, are dynamically interrelated.

The Project Team

If we look at the examples of trade union projects given earlier, we will see that not only do they have quite specific goals and clearly limited time-scales, but they draw on contributions from a range of different people and organisations. This is one of the characteristics of most projects: they are team activities. Even relatively small-scale projects within one organisation or company are likely to draw together specialists from different departments.

This process of bringing together people from different backgrounds to work on a common task is one of the great strengths of project work, but it can also be a source of problems if not properly understood and managed. All members of the team need to have a clear and common understanding of the goals of the project and of their particular contribution to it. They also need to learn to work harmoniously together, usually in a very short space of time, for it is generally the case that a team is assembled specifically for an individual project. Effective team work, however, can bring enormous benefits. The team not only makes possible what before was not achievable individually; it can also provide a source of mutual support, companionship and sociability and can at its best create a shared learning environment for the community of the project.

In the case of transnational projects, the team will not only be composed of people with different areas of skill and competence, but will bring together people from different organisations and from different national cultures with different mother tongues. Note, too, that in some of our examples not all the partner organisations are trade union bodies. There are instances of collaboration with universities, commercial enterprises and consultancies. It is likely that different partners may have somewhat different emphases and want different things from the project. In these cases, it will be even more important to ensure that there are common understandings about the nature and scope of the project. Clear communication is essential.

Assembling and managing a strong and well-integrated team is one of the keys to successful project work.

Time, Cost and Quality

The key material dimensions to any project are:

- **Time** - set out in the detailed schedule or workplan
- **Cost** - set out in the budget for the project
- **Quality or Performance** - what the product of the project will do, set out in detail in the project specification

These three elements have been conceptualised as three points of a triangle²:

² Barnes, N.M.L. (1985) 'Project Management Framework' in International Project Management Yearbook 1985. Butterworth Scientific, UK

If the materials production is running late, it may be possible still to meet the delivery date by:

- Employing more people or working overtime (i.e. sacrificing the Cost factor).
- Reducing the amount or quality of materials to be produced (i.e. compromising the Quality factor).

Equally, if we are to meet the Quality factor of the safety handbook, we may well need to sacrifice something on Cost and/or Time. And if Cost is our key factor, it is likely to have implications for Quality or Performance - and we may need to take longer.

It is essential to know in precise terms what the objectives of the project are, how they relate to each other, and where the priority lies. They represent inter-related but potentially competing forces, which will dominate the direction of the entire project.

Risk

Finally, because they are unique ventures, because they depend on new ad-hoc groupings of people and because they usually need to achieve their objectives within tight constraints, projects involve a significant element of risk. We have seen some of these risks in the previous section - the risk of late delivery, going over-budget and of not meeting performance criteria. There are other risks associated with the team element of the project - of assembling a group of people who may be perfectly competent individuals but who find difficulties in working together. Equally there may be risks associated with the management of the project - for example, of poor communication, of vital decisions going by default or crucial documentation being lost.

It is important that the risks involved in the project are understood from the outset and that from the early stages of planning appropriate steps are taken to recognise and avoid or minimise those risks.

Summary

In this chapter we have explored some of the basic characteristics of project work. Here again are some of the key points we have covered:

- Every project is a unique undertaking.
- Projects have specific goals.
- Projects have limited time-spans with clear beginnings and ends.
- Many projects involve similar sets of major phases - conception, design and implementation.
- Projects also involve four key elements - the team, cost, time and quality.
- Project teams are likely to involve people from different disciplines and organisations and - in the case of transnational projects - people from different languages and cultures.
- Projects often operate outside or across normal institutional structures.

- Successful projects understand the relationship between time, cost and quality objectives.
- Projects involve risks, which successful projects recognise and avoid.

We shall return to these ideas in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3

Understanding the Organisational Context

Most projects operate within an organisational context. In this chapter we are going to look at:

- The importance of understanding the organisational context in which a project is located
- The use of projects in developing and piloting solutions to organisational needs
- How projects relate to organisational structures
- The importance of identifying project stakeholders and understanding and negotiating their various interests.

The project as an organisational tool

Projects, as we have seen, are focused initiatives with limited objectives, limited duration and limited resources. Viewed from an organisational perspective, effective projects can often best be thought of as measures to devise and test potential solutions to problems which the organisation has encountered. They can provide the organisation with the tools to design and pilot new products or services, or to find ways of improving current practice, within a defined framework and a specific commitment of resources.

The projects that an organisation undertakes need to be closely related to its central strategic planning. The more precisely an individual project can be focused and targeted to explore a specific area or to provide answers to specific questions thrown up by strategic reviews, the more valuable it is likely to be. In this way, although at an operational level it may sit somewhat outside the normal structure and workflow of the organisation, the project can be seen to be contributing directly to its ongoing development.

This view of the relationship between project and organisation has a number of implications, which apply equally to commercial enterprises, public sector organisations, educational institutions and trade unions:

- The definition of the project needs to be informed by a clear understanding of the strategic vision and priorities of the organisation. There needs to be a transparent rationale for the project in terms of its contribution to the development of the organisation.
- At its heart the project is concerned with problem-solving and consequently is focused on the possibility of change – either on improving existing ways of doing things or on developing new services and products. All these can contribute to helping the organisation move from where it is to where it ideally wants to be.
- As well as being informed by these concerns, the project needs to be integrated within the organisation. Amongst other things, this means that it will need recognition and institutional support beyond the immediate project team. It will in a real sense need to be 'sponsored' by the organisation.

- If it is to be effective, the project has also to be informed by clearly identified needs which it will seek to address. In the case of a project concerned with internal change, these needs may simply be articulated within the organisation itself. In most cases, however, they will also include the needs of intended target audiences for products and services. As we noted in the previous chapter, many projects include a formal needs assessment as an early phase of the project work to provide a more detailed definition of user needs.
- If the project is to have any real worth as a pilot experiment, its results need to be monitored and evaluated against an appropriate set of criteria, so that its success can be judged. Equally, the results of the evaluation need to be fed back into the larger organisation.
- It is important to recognise, too, that there is a clear possibility that a project may not achieve the expected outcome. Whilst every effort needs to be made to maximise its success, it will inevitably have an element of risk associated with it. Equally, the investment in a project which does not achieve its anticipated objectives may nonetheless be extremely valuable in providing important information and experience that helps the organisation in its future development.
- Finally, if the project has been successful, there needs to be a clear plan of how its results will be exploited by the organisation. This may entail further development work but the aim must be to incorporate the results eventually within the normal ongoing work of the organisation. In a trade union education context, this may involve, for example, taking a training package in a new field, which has been produced and piloted in a project context, revising it in the light of the feedback obtained and offering it within the mainstream programme of courses.

Managing organisations and managing projects

Within this view of the role of project work within an organisational context, we need to look in more detail at how the management of the project relates to the management structures of the organisation and to be aware of areas where problems may emerge.

Every organisation needs to have some way of dividing up work, and with it responsibility and accountability. This is what provides the basic structure of the organisation and how it operates. Without a coherent structure there will be tasks that don't get done, information which never reaches its appropriate destination and decisions which are made randomly, if at all. Clearly, structures will vary between different individual organisations, but traditionally most large organisations have had a structure something like Figure 3.1.

Working with stakeholders

It is also clear, though, that in many projects there are not simply the interests of a single organisation to be considered, but of several. To understand fully the context of the project and to be able to manage it effectively, we need to identify all of its stakeholders and understand their various interests. The project stakeholders are all those organisations (and individuals) who are actively involved in the project or whose interests may be affected by its work. As well as the coordinating organisation, they are likely as a minimum to include:

- The project manager and project team
- Partner organisations, their leaders and senior staff
- End users and their organisations (i.e. those who will be recipients of the products and services the project is developing)
- Funding organisations and sponsors supporting the project.

Their interest in the project and the objectives they hope to achieve may differ considerably from stakeholder to stakeholder. These are differences which can frequently be the source of tensions and it is important to understand, manage and negotiate them, if the project is to be successful. This is an essential ingredient to be taken into account in framing the initial project plan. It is also crucial, too, to monitor changes in stakeholder attitude and expectation during the project and to provide appropriate feedback on progress to all stakeholders at every stage.

In the context of European trade union projects, key stakeholders are likely to be national trade union confederations and their affiliated organisations. However, there are likely to be other stakeholders who need to be taken into account, including the European Trade Union Confederation, government departments, local authorities, voluntary agencies and, of course, the European Commission as a potential source of financial support.

To summarise, then:

- Projects can be seen as important tools to address organisational needs.
- To be effective, projects need to be understood and integrated within their wider organisational context. This also means ensuring institutional support and 'buy-in' at senior level.
- Lastly, there is a need to consider and address the needs of all the project stakeholders, both inside and outside the sponsoring organisation.