

# FAST PROJECTS

PROJECT  
MANAGEMENT  
WHEN TIME  
IS SHORT



FERGUS O'CONNELL

# **Fast Projects**

**Project management when time is short**

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- 10** Maybe it's a separate thing, maybe it's an accumulation of all of the preceding things, but I call it 'Where did the week go?' syndrome. Did you ever have one of those weeks when you get to the end of it and you wonder where the days could have disappeared to and what the hell you achieved? No? Lucky you!

As a result of these things, the ad drifted on and days were lost waiting for people to fit things into their schedule and come back with their piece done, so that the next bit could take place. It's important to say, too, that none of the things that had to get done was a surprise – once we thought about it. *The problem was we didn't think about it.*

The things that we have identified above are common to projects in all industries. But there are some industries that are far better at dealing with them than others. The film industry is one where, with some well-publicised exceptions, the problem of projects overshooting the schedule and the budget has largely been solved. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for example, was a colossal, \$300 million project. Yet its three releases came in on time and within budget, meeting the three release dates.

How does the film industry do this? The answer is that it builds a very detailed plan of how the movie will be shot. The plan is called a shooting schedule. A shooting schedule is a day-by-day, person-by-person plan of how the project will be carried out. Where most plans in our kinds of projects are pious hopes about the future – 'wouldn't it be great if it turned out like this?' – shooting schedules are anything but pious hopes. Shooting schedules are *descriptions* of the future – 'here's how we intend things to go' – and by and large movie people will try to ensure that things do go that way.

Now you may argue that there is a difference between making a movie and the kinds of projects that we tend to be involved in. I will argue that there are far more similarities than differences. And these days most movies are project managed with an accuracy which would make the most pernickety accountant happy.

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Conventional wisdom says that for projects in knowledge and high-tech industries it is not possible to build a day-by-day, person-by-person plan. My answer to that is ‘Nuts!’ It’s possible. I know because I’ve done it. Figure 3.2 is a fragment of exactly such a plan. And if you build a one-day level of detail plan, what will happen? Well, the answer is that all of the above causes of project overshoots will pretty much disappear because:

- 1 The goal of the project will be well defined – otherwise you would not have been able to build such a plan.
- 2 All the jobs needed will be in your plan.
- 3 There will be no delays because your plan will give you the precise sequencing of the jobs.
- 4 Managing the project will be very straightforward because you will know what everybody has to do every day.
- 5 Your plan will show you exactly who is needed at what time.
- 6 Since people will know when they are needed, they will ensure their availability well in advance.
- 7 You will see exactly what a delay is going to do to the project.
- 8 You will be able to see exactly what the effect of starting a task early is going to be.
- 9 You will be able to see exactly what the effect of finishing a task early is going to be.
- 10 You will know exactly what has to be done in any given week of the project.

‘That’s all very well,’ I hear you say, ‘but on knowledge and high-tech projects things change – sometimes radically.’ Or, ‘We’re in the blah sector and it’s completely volatile and things will constantly be changing over the life of the project.’

Yes, yes – of course things will change. But we already know how to deal with changes. We have our three possible responses, given in Chapter 2, namely:

- significant change
- use the contingency
- work more hours.



## CHAPTER 4

# GETTING PEOPLE TO DO THE WORK

Like many things in life, project management is a problem in supply and demand. The demand comes from the work to be done. (This was identified in Chapter 3.) The supply comes from the people to do the work. In theory your job is very simple. If there are 100 person-days of work to be done, there had better be 100 person-days of people to do the work.

If you want to have a fast project you want to make sure that this supply–demand equation stays in balance – that there’s always enough supply to match demand. Unfortunately the demand has a tendency to go up as stakeholders ask for more things, extra things, ‘Can it do this?’, ‘I thought it was going to do that’. If that isn’t bad enough the supply has a tendency to go down as you never seem to have enough resources to do all the work. Every time the two go out of balance, this will cause ‘drag’ on your fast project, causing it to slow down. Most of your project management life will be about trying to bring these two quantities into balance. If they go out of balance for too long then the whole project can crash and burn.

“Most of your project management life will be about trying to bring these two quantities into balance”

To be completely precise, one should really say ‘resources’ here rather than people. However, since in most projects it’s the people resources which are the problem, this is what you focus on.

There are three issues here:

- people being there to do the work.
- those people’s availability.
- the strengths and weaknesses of those people.

By factoring in these things, you add in to your plan the other ‘parameters’ discussed earlier in Chapter 3, i.e.:

- who will do the job.
- those people’s availability.
- when they will do the job.

You could also – if you chose to – determine

- how much the job will cost (its budget)

simply by knowing the cost of the work that you have identified in Chapter 3.

The three people-related issues – people, availability and strengths – are discussed in the following sections.

## People

You need people to do the work. It’s quite common that at the beginning of a project, you don’t know who some or all of those people are. Then it is customary to indicate these on the plan with so-called