

How to quick start a project in 9 minutes



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Start

Since we only have 9 minutes, let's dive straight into the critical points!

1.1 Identify your project sponsor

Your sponsor is the person who has the *ultimate* power to make decisions about your project. The buck stops at this person, even if it means he or she decides to *cancel* or *postpone* your project!

In small organisations, your sponsor may be easy to identify. In larger organisations, it can be quite a challenge!



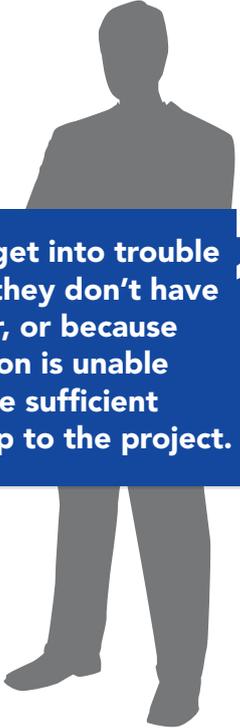
The sponsor needs to be *one person*, not a group of people. Do your best to identify the sponsor early on.

1.2 Check that your project is feasible

Some projects start out as great ideas, but with insufficient resources (eg: money and people) to get them done.



The best projects start out with a feasibility study, showing a return on investment for the effort you are about to put in.



Projects get into trouble because they don't have a sponsor, or because that person is unable to provide sufficient leadership to the project.

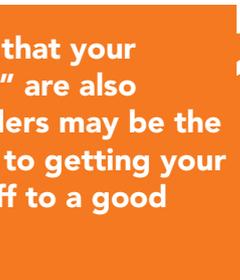
Needs

2.1 Identify your project stakeholders

A stakeholder is anyone *involved, affected or influencing* your project. Stakeholders can be individuals (eg: your boss), groups of people (eg: the HR Department) or external parties (eg: a contractor).



When identifying project stakeholders, think beyond the people you respect and get on well with.



Realising that your "enemies" are also stakeholders may be the first step to getting your project off to a good start.

2.2 Capture your stakeholders' needs

Sure, you have some goals in mind about what *you need* to make your project a success, but what about the other stakeholders?

For example, your contractor may *need* to make a profit and be paid on time; your team may *need* to be sure they still have a job when the project is finished; your boss may *need* to look good in front of her boss. Your "enemies" may *need* an opportunity to voice their concerns early.

If you can help your stakeholders with what they need, you may find them more open to helping you deliver your project.



It can be a mistake to assume your stakeholders have the same goals for the project as you do.

The better you understand the *psychological needs* of your stakeholders, the more power you'll have to initiate and push through the changes that the project requires.



Tasks

3.1 Break your project into phases

A phase is a trick project managers use to break their projects into smaller, more manageable chunks.

For example, you might have a "planning" phase and a "testing" phase. You can invent any number of phases, and give those phases any name you like.



The more relevant the phase names are to your specific project, the better people will understand what your project is all about.

3.2 List your project tasks

Tasks are the pieces of work that need to be done. Always describe your tasks with a verb/action word (eg: *choose* supplier, *negotiate* agreement). This makes it clear that the task is a piece of work for someone to do.

Tasks are generally sizeable pieces of work. Even in small projects, a task should require at least a few hours of labour to complete.



Avoid listing tasks that are too small. For example, "call customer". Sure, you need to make that phone call, but if your tasks are too small, your task list will expand until your seemingly simple project starts looking like Ben Hur! If you need the fine details, create a checklist for each task.



Keeping your task list short will help you to focus your mind on the bigger picture, which will help make you a better project manager.

Scope

4.1 Describe your deliverables

Deliverables are the *measurable* outputs of your project. For example, “website wire frames - approved by client” or “contract signed”.



Ensure your deliverables are measurable. For example, “website wire frames” doesn’t sufficiently describe how you are going to measure it – “approved by client” adds the clarity.

4.2 Develop a design specification

The design specification is the nitty gritty detail describing what your deliverables will look like. Design specifications are unique to each type of project. For example, “wire frames” for a website or “architectural plans” for a house.



You may need to involve technical experts to develop a design specification.

Time

You probably have a deadline to finish your project, but how do you know if it’s realistic?

5.1 Estimate the expected time to complete each task

The ideal way is to ask people who have *experience* in doing the tasks. Always ask them for their *worst case* and best case estimates.



Factor in the worst case scenarios to ensure your estimates are realistic. Things will go wrong and being too optimistic is a sure way to set yourself up for failure.

5.2 Link the tasks into a logical, sequential order

For example, you can’t design your website until you’ve chosen a designer. You can’t employ a designer until the budget has been approved. These are called “dependent tasks”.

Some tasks are not dependent – they can occur at the same time as others. For example, “design wire frames” and “draft website text” may be able to occur in parallel.

5.3 Determine a realistic project finish date

One of your main roles as project manager is to collate the task list, associated timeframes and dependencies into a *realistic* schedule that can be communicated to everyone.



If the deadline you've been given doesn't look realistic, consider these options:

- Reduce the scope by reviewing the deliverables and cutting out the lower priority ones.
- Ask for more time, now!
- Ask for more resources, now!
- Start looking for a new job... only joking.

People

6.1 Identify your project decision makers

These are the people who have the *power* to make decisions about the scope, time and cost of your project. For example, the people who have the power to approve your website wire frames, or approve your budget.

Of course, your project sponsor (see 1.1) is part of this group, although your sponsor is the *ultimate* decision maker - for times when your other decision makers are unable to make a decision.



Some people give you impression they are decision makers but, in truth, lack the requisite power.

6.2 Communicate everyone's role and responsibilities

As project manager you act as a central point of communication for all stakeholders. Therefore, you need to be clear about what you expect from them, and what they should expect from you. For example:

Role	Responsibilities
Sponsor	Provides financial resources; ultimate decision maker; create or terminate the project
Decision maker	Makes decisions about scope, time, cost and quality
Project manager	Plan and control the project together with team members; central point of communication
Team member	Help plan the project; complete agreed deliverables



Communicating frequently with your decision makers is a smart way to keep your project on track. It can also help you gain a promotion!



Project management super-stars are the ones who quickly determine the *real* decision makers and focus their energies communicating with these people.

Costs

7.1 Estimate the expected labour to complete each task

We're back to making estimates around our task list (see 3.2), but now we're asking our experienced people how much *labour* (or effort) they'll need to complete each task.



Time and labour are different, even though they're both measured in units of time. For example, it took me *3 months* (of time) to publish this article, but only *12 hours* (of labour). The 12 hours of labour is where the cost comes in. To earn a living out of writing articles, someone would need to pay me for those 12 hours!

7.2 Estimate other non-labour costs to complete each task

For example, to complete the task, you may need to purchase materials (eg: a software license), or pay for other resources (eg: airfare and hotel accommodation).

Risks

Risk planning is a way of helping you and your stakeholders overcome that "pain in the stomach" feeling that often accompanies a new project. Psychologically, risk planning is a trick that project managers use to help everyone feel better about what they're embarking on.

8.1 Identify your project risks

For example, "There is a risk of the project being delayed because of unexpected changes to the original design".



Your job as project manager is to help your stakeholders communicate what is truly worrying them, and discuss solutions – before it's too late!

8.2 Prioritise your risks

Prioritising your risks into *probability* (of occurring) and *impact* (if they occur) will help you identify which risks need further discussion.

"High, medium, low" is a fast and commonly used method for prioritising risks. For example, the *probability* of our web designer resigning is **medium**, though the *impact* to our project is **high**.

The biggest risks to projects are sometimes overlooked because people are afraid to talk about them!



8.3 Develop prevention strategies

Prevention strategies reduce the probability of a risk occurring. For example, we may want to ensure that our web designer has the equipment and environment to enable her to focus on and enjoy her job, *reducing the probability* of her resigning.



Smart project managers focus on risk *prevention* strategies which are always easier than dealing with the consequences of a risk actually happening. If only the Deepwater Horizon oil rig operators in the Gulf of Mexico had tested their blow-out preventers a few more times!

8.4 Develop contingency strategies

Contingency strategies *reduce the impact* if a risk actually happens. For example, what will we do if our web designer *actually* resigns?

Our contingency strategy may be to approve, in advance, the extra time and budget required to hire a new designer. This way, if it happens, we can act quickly - without going into panic mode!

Project plan

9.1 Write it all down!

Few people enjoy documenting things, but it adds extra clarity to what's in your head, and will make more sense to your stakeholders.



For smaller projects, if you and your stakeholders discuss each of the steps (above), and reach agreement on them, you may not need a formal project plan.

So, there you have it! Twenty years of experience in 9 minutes! 🌀



It's not so much the final project plan that's important, but rather the *process of discussion* it forces you and your stakeholders to go through.

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