

# Maximizing Project Success: Methodology versus Tools

by Michael G. Martin, PMP



Imagine that you are responsible for managing a project that has an estimated cost in excess of \$40 million and requires approximately 7 million staff-hours to complete. In addition, your organization doesn't have an established project management approach or methodology, nor is it using a standard management tool to assist in developing and managing the schedule and resources required to complete this endeavor. On top of all this, the project sponsor is pushing you to complete the project well ahead of the scheduled completion date. Does this sound familiar?

For the Starrett brothers, this was a real-life situation that occurred back in 1930, during construction of the Empire State Building. The building, which was built during the Depression, was part of a competition between Walter Chrysler of the Chrysler Corporation and John Jakob Raskob, founder of General Motors, to see who could build the tallest building in the world. As the contractor for the 102-story building, the Starrett brothers were faced with many obstacles just to complete the project, much less complete it ahead of schedule. Amazingly enough, however, they completed it in just over 13 months. In fact, the framework of the structure rose at a rate of approximately 4½ stories per week. This was a phenomenal accomplishment even based on today's standards. Again, keep in mind that this was done in 1930, when there were no project management software packages available to help them manage the schedule or resources.

In my position as President of the Project Management Institute's

(PMI®) Georgia chapter, I'm often asked what project management tools (software) I would recommend for an organization to use in managing projects. I usually respond with a question back to the individual about whether or not their organization follows an established project management methodology. The most common answer is "no," generally based on the belief within the organization that if they have a tool, that will be "all" they need to help them manage projects successfully. This is one of the biggest misconceptions today in companies trying to move toward a project environment.

One organization I'm familiar with spent approximately one million dollars on a high-end project management software package with the perception that the product, of and by itself, would cure all their ills of mismanaging projects. However, the system was not intuitive; a great deal of training and discipline was required for staff members to be able use the various components to their fullest capability. After just a couple of months of trying to implement this new system, the company put the software package on the shelf, never to be used again. This was a million-dollar investment that had no quantifiable benefits whatsoever, other than a hard lesson learned.

I like to use the analogy of a football team that is given equipment and training facilities that are far superior to those of any of their opponents. However, just because they have the best equipment or facilities doesn't automatically make them the best in their league, nor does it correlate to success. Unless a team first establishes the processes, methodologies, and discipline for practicing and working out consistently, as a team, it doesn't matter

whether the equipment is the state-of-the-art or an antique. The result will be the same in both scenarios: "failure" to achieve their objective.

This analogy applies to organizations that believe that simply buying a tool will help them manage their projects better. Again, this cannot be further from the truth. In fact, if a consistent methodology and processes aren't in place first, then the tools are nothing more than a facade hiding all the ugliness of poor project management processes.

This is not to say that management software or tools are bad. But to realize the potential and usefulness of those tools, an organization must first have a consistent project management methodology that is understood and practiced throughout the organization. The key word here is "practiced." Just like in the analogy, if the football team doesn't practice and isn't disciplined in its approach, then it doesn't matter how good the equipment is; the end result will be a poor performance.

If you or your organization is considering implementing project management, the first step should be to develop a solid methodology and approach for managing projects. Once the methodology has been established, then the focus should be directed toward finding a tool that will help support and increase the efficiency of the methodology. In other words, the methodology should drive the tool, rather than the tool driving the methodology. Having a methodology that is understood and practiced does not ensure success; however, it will maximize the likelihood that your projects will be completed successfully in the future.

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