

Is project management really rocket science?

Two different industry commentators argue the case **for** and **against**



“As an ex-rocket scientist with the Ministry of Defence, I am well placed to comment on this question. We can use it to make a useful point. Rocket science is a cliché for something complicated that can only be undertaken by experts.”

FOR

But despite its mysterious aura, rocket science is manageable. Given sufficient time and resources, a team of experts can engineer a rocket motor to meet a specified requirement or to establish that it is not feasible. They will arrive at a conclusion one way or the other if they are given time, so long as they can use known technology.

Project management is different. There are almost always constraints that make it impossible to analyse the system completely before making decisions, and the people and organisations involved are much less predictable than the materials and equipment used to make a rocket.

Sound planning is invaluable and without it a project stands little chance of success, but there is a point beyond which additional detail will not help. There comes a time at which we have to start work even though we expect to have to revise the plan later. This is not the steady refinement of an evolving technical design, but the active response of a system to an unpredictable environment and people who cannot be controlled perfectly.

Many projects fail to plan and so, as the saying goes, plan to fail. This does not mean that very detailed planning can guarantee success. Project management involves dynamic decision-making in a changing environment and this is qualitatively different to designing with predictable materials and technology.

Project management is not rocket science. But it can be just as complicated and it is frequently more complex, which is quite a different matter.

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“Of course project management isn't rocket science. The vast majority of projects – both those that require a 'recovery plan' and those that are successful – tend to follow the basics and do the basics well. So what are the basics?”

Against

Every project should start with 'why?' Why is it needed? Why spend time, effort and cost on delivering a project? If you can't satisfy the sponsor, stakeholders and project resources with the why, then the project shouldn't happen.

What is the project going to deliver? Gathering a list of defined products that the project aims to deliver is critical to understanding if they will deliver the why. Products are tangible outputs that a person can touch, feel or see.

How are we going to deliver it? A project should start with a clear plan. The plan is the most powerful communication tool that any project manager can use. It engages people at all levels of involvement.

Who is responsible for delivering tasks and key deliverables? Once all the tasks and products are known, the project board agrees who is best to deliver the products. This may be a supplier, in-house resources, or both.

What are the potential problems that might happen along the way? Stuff happens! Potential problems will arise when following the project plan; these are risks. Actions should be agreed, to either reduce or remove the risks.

Track, control and report the delivery of the project. Report progress to plan on how much has been spent, or how much has been delivered. Most importantly, focus on reporting the future, for example, how much money or time needs to be spent for the project to be complete?

The art of project management is to follow the basics and do them well. Projects are not complex. The deliverables and products involved in the project might be complex, but not the project itself. People and poor management of the project are what make project management complicated.

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