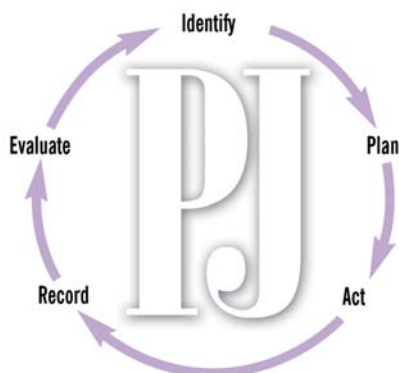


How to manage projects effectively

In this article, **Tim Saunders** introduces key project management concepts, explains how to apply them and gives tips for success



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Identify knowledge gaps

1. What does project management involve?
2. What are the key stages of a project?
3. What things go wrong in projects?

Before reading on, think about how this article may help you to do your job better. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society's areas of competence for pharmacists are listed in "Plan and record," (available at: www.rpsgb.org/education). This article relates to "effective management" (see appendix 4 of "Plan and record").

Project management, as my friends delight in reminding me, is something that can be done by anyone. I agree with them, but always point out that just as anyone can drive a car, drivers are required to be trained and tested before they are allowed to mix freely with other road users. In the same way, managing projects effectively is a skill that must be learnt and practised.

A "project" can be defined as a temporary scheme that has, usually, not been attempted before. But even if the scheme is similar to a past project, it is likely that the people and conditions will be different. Managing projects may, therefore, be outside the core skill set of many pharmacists. For example, dispensing, counselling or designing a drug regimen for a patient is routine and predictable — not project work. However, it is increasingly likely that pharmacists will be required to participate in and even lead projects. Community pharmacists, for example, might have to introduce a set of standard operating procedures (SOPs) to meet Royal Pharmaceutical Society requirements and hospital pharmacists might find themselves having to introduce or upgrade an automated system.

Such situations present various questions. Take the introduction of SOPs: How might you get the outcomes you need? How do you

decide what SOPs to implement? How will they be developed and what will they look like when they are complete? Who will write the SOPs and how will you give them time to do so while ensuring the pharmacy runs smoothly? How are you going to train your staff on SOPs and how can you be sure you are going to have everything ready by an agreed deadline? Project management skills will help you find the best answers.

Alternatively, you might have to choose between managing a project yourself or bringing in a project manager. Again, a good idea of what project management involves will help you make this decision.

Features of a successful project

Project management is, essentially, a series of methods of managing a unique and transient venture in order to achieve a goal. It is a young science, despite being an ancient skill. The skills that were used to build the pyramids and ancient cities are now being applied to projects such as developing a new chemical entity or improving customer service. Formal project management theory has its roots in the management of large engineering enterprises, most notably in the application of technologies that are combined to make large battleships.

In the mid 1990s, the Australian navy embarked on an ambitious project to build a fleet of long-range, diesel-powered submarines. Within two years, things were seriously awry and a 1999 Government

report to the Australian Minister of Defence noted: "In summary, the primary prerequisites for a successful project — clear and shared aims, competent, committed and well managed parties, properly communicating, and brought together by an appropriate contract along with related mechanisms to bring it all together — are all missing." Three years later, the submarines were in service, but only just — they are reputed to be noisy, leaky and inferior to original specifications in important respects. In addition, the Australian navy's procurement division may take years to recover its tarnished reputation.

To summarise, a successful project has:

- A clear and agreed idea among stakeholders of what the finished project looks like
- An organisational structure with sufficient technical capability
- Enough resources (time, money, facilities and people)

Organisational structure

There are three main project management roles: sponsor, project manager and team member. By making the organisational structure clear and setting up effective reporting lines, a good project management environment will be created. In a small project, these roles can be performed by one person.

Sponsor The project sponsor is responsible for authorising the project. The sponsor is a

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Panel 1: Organisational structure and project complexity

Project complexity	Project manager	Project team	Sponsorship
Simple	Trusted individual with aptitude	Team of willing and able personnel	Work colleague
Standard	Experienced individual with aptitude and proven project management ability	Trusted and experienced staff preferably with a track record of working well together	Your line manager
Complex	Formally trained project manager with appropriate experience	Expert with proven track record of delivery of similar projects to time	Senior or executive managers, principles of the company or a formal steering committee

person or committee (eg, board of directors) sufficiently experienced and committed to the success of a project to provide support, direction and resources to the project manager.

Project manager The project manager is responsible for the day-to-day running of the project, and is usually appointed by the sponsor. A large project may require an overall project manager and several sub-managers. Similarly, large projects are likely to require a more structured style of management than smaller projects.

The project manager is the most influential figure in a project. And, although ideally, he or she should be technically qualified in the project area, it is more important for him or her to be sufficiently qualified and experienced in managing the type of project at hand. My own rule of thumb for projects of moderate or high complexity is that I must see proof of at least two successful project outcomes of projects of a similar type before handing over to a potential project manager. If these requirements are not met, I will ask the person to deliver sections of a project under the supervision of a more senior project manager. Other requisites of a good project manager are:

- The ability to communicate clearly
- The ability to solve problems and to handle interpersonal conflicts
- The ability to plan and secure commitments

If you are given a project to manage and have no experience, improve your chances of success by enlisting an experienced project manager to act as your mentor. Ask for advice at key stages and, if you can, persuade him or her to audit your progress and methods.

Project team members Project work often involves the creation of multi-disciplinary teams, with people coming together from different departments, and possibly organisations, to make the project happen. The success of a project relies on its team members and it requires skill and good judgement to get the right people on board. Depending on the project, teams can be large or small, and full- or part-time.

All team members should have the proven skills to deliver what is required of them and the ability to work well with others. However, bringing an effective team together quickly and getting that team on track can be a challenge. One useful strategy is to make sure that all team members are involved in the planning of project activities.

Gathering people from different departments in a company might mean that an employee has to report to a line manager and a project manager and find him or herself being pulled in different directions by the demands of the project and their normal job. In such cases, a good project manager will come to an understanding with both line managers and team members, with respect to work priorities, and keep communication channels open.

Project complexity Larger projects generally need more structure than smaller ones. Panel 1 suggests the organisational structures required to manage projects of different levels of complexity. Technical projects are easier to achieve than those that involve cultural change where the engagement of change management experts is recommended.

Stages of a project

The basic stages of a project are shown in Figure 1. Projects should be designed to progress one stage at a time. It is fine to back-track to a previous stage if things get tough, but it could be disastrous to leap-frog any stage in the belief that it will save time and effort. The stages are there to reduce the risk of failure.

Proposal At the proposal stage, the “customer” (eg, business owner, regulatory body) describes what is required. The sponsor then formalises the proposal by providing information such as the time available or how the project fits into a larger scenario. The requirements should be clear, so a written proposal is best. A good proposal will align with the overall objectives of an organisation. For example, a proposal for a shop refit may have been identified as a means of meeting a business’s objectives to return increased revenue and margin, which in turn meet its target rate of return on investment. At this stage, the

sponsor may assign a manager and team members to the project.

Definition A project definition is a description of what the project has to achieve and how it will go about it. This is usually written by the project manager and team members and approved by the sponsor. The customer is involved as necessary. Key sections include:

- Objectives
- Risk management plan (see below)
- Budget (costs need to be quantified and resource allocated)
- Communications plan (a description of how and when the project participants will communicate with stakeholders)
- Schedule (see below)
- Exclusions (a list of related issues you will not address during the project — this is an excellent way of managing stakeholder expectations)
- Standards (see below)
- Assignment of responsibility within the project team

Small projects will only need a simple definition document with one or two pages of actions. In comparison, a large project can require a signed project definition, signed contracts, an agreed formal invoicing and accounting process, a risk management plan, a contractor management plan and a project management system.

Project management tools, such as document templates, checklists and project planning software can make your work easier and you should use them whenever you can. Most large organisations will design their own tools. Tools such as PRINCE 2 (a widely used “off-the-shelf” project management system) allow a project to be managed from start to finish.

Risk management plan Making a risk management plan means listing things that might go wrong, assessing their consequences (severe, moderate or negligible) and their likelihood (high, medium or low) and deciding what you are going to do about them. Possible responses to a risk are to:

- Take action to avoid or mitigate it
- Transfer it (eg, take out insurance)
- Accept it

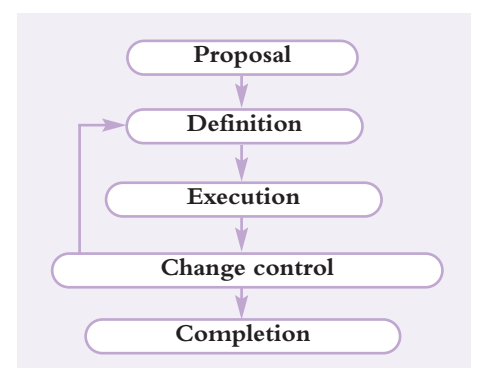


Figure 1: Basic project model

Panel 2: Tips for project success

- Get off to a good start — get your team members motivated by making personal contact with them (eg, hold an informal get together or arrange one-to-one discussions)
- With long projects, it can be easy to lose sight of the aim, so it is a useful exercise to backtrack regularly and ask “what are we trying to achieve?”
- Eliminate fears and uncertainty by holding a formal analysis of what all project stakeholders want
- Keep morale up by dealing with staff concerns immediately — it is easy for people to worry that any failure will reflect on them badly, about what will happen to them at the end of the project or, if they have duties outside the project, how they can effectively meet these
- Make sure the project has input from separate interested parties, eg, if the aim of the project is to develop a new product, parties representing business and consumers should be invited to contribute
- Nurture an open environment to encourage sharing of ideas
- Although projects do not provide the best conditions for formal training, to maintain a motivated environment, the project could be promoted as providing an opportunity to work with professionals from other areas, allowing team members to experience a wider variety of working practices and develop their skills
- Break projects into small sections to make it easier to follow progress — this will make your team confident that the project is achievable and that they are on the right track

It is typical to mitigate all risks with a high likelihood and severe consequences, transfer those with severe consequences and low likelihood and accept the rest.

Schedule Having a schedule should help you to keep to deadlines. A project schedule is a detailed list of activities and the resources needed. Deciding whether or not each activity has to be finished before starting the next will produce a schedule. Project planning software, such as Microsoft Project, is designed to automate this. Placing milestones at natural breaks (eg, when SOPs are written and the training is to start) in the schedule is a good way of reporting and checking progress. There should be at least six milestones in a schedule.

Appropriate standards The project definition should refer to external, commonly understood principles you will work to, without going into unnecessary detail. This process is used extensively in construction and technology projects. Common standards pharmacists may encounter include Good Manufacturing Practice, the Society’s Code of Ethics, tax rules, SOPs and company standards.

Execution Once the project and its definitions have been approved, it can move into the execution stage. For project managers, execution mostly means ensuring all the participants achieve what they said they would, to agreed times and standards. Regular project progress briefings are a useful, formal way to do this. A large part of the fun of projects is the teamwork and feeling of camaraderie produced through making good progress, and my advice is to get together regularly with your project team, both informally and formally, all together and one to one.

Change control Regardless of how well planned your project is, unpredictable things always happen. Projects have three constraints: time, quality and cost. If any of these changes to a significant extent the project will have to be replanned or it may fail to meet all its objectives. Change control involves team members redefining the project and gaining agreement from the sponsor. This can be time consuming and disruptive, but is an excellent way of ensuring that when things go wrong, the problems are acknowledged and the project continued with revised parameters. When the alternative is to give your customer a nasty surprise by bringing the project in late or over cost, or not fulfilling all of the expectations, the value of change control is clear.

Completion When the project manager, sponsor and customer have verified delivery of objectives, the project can be closed. Remember to have a formal celebration with your team. In addition, take time to analyse what went well and not so well. It is useful to learn from mistakes and, if you are involved in projects often, it is good practice to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of each project and commit this to paper.

Things that can go wrong

Four common project difficulties are meeting deadlines, keeping to budgets and dealing with someone leaving or a conflict. However, if you follow good project management principles, you should avoid such disasters. Panel 2 gives a few tips for project success.

Missing the deadline Evidence indicates that if a project is late by the time it is 15 per cent complete, it will never recover. I have found this to be true in practice and have used this early warning system to manage the expectations of my customers. If you receive information that indicates you may be late, communicate this quickly and honestly to the sponsor. Late projects can often be brought back on schedule by cutting back on luxuries or allowing a small overspend on overtime.

Exceeding your budget You should have a good idea of what you will have spent by the time each of your milestones is reached. Ensure approval to spend and budget reporting is managed by one member of the team so adverse trends are immediately obvious. If overspends are discovered, investigate quickly

and report to the sponsor. If the overspend looks unavoidable (eg, unexpected increase in prices or interest rates), redo the budget and get agreement to the new figure.

Departure of a team member Just as everything seems to be running smoothly, one of your team members tells you that he is leaving. Panic sets in. What will you do without him, at this crucial stage? Try to persuade him to stay. Sometimes a modest increase in remuneration is a cost-effective way of achieving this, especially if the cost of delay and readvertising are considered. However, you need to accept that departures are a fact of life. What you will need to do is find the right person to fill the position as soon as possible and ensure that he or she is seamlessly integrated into the team. This can be achieved by a thorough induction so that he or she feels part of the project team as early as possible. Project teams go through exactly the same group dynamics as any other work group.

Conflicts Some sort of conflict is inevitable in a project, be it a disagreement about available resources or a personality clash. An empathetic approach is vital here. Try to get to the root cause by being tough on the problem, not on the people. Although conflicts can have a negative effect on the team’s morale, it is important the issues are not buried and differences are openly expressed so they can be addressed and resolved.

Further reading and information

- J Rodney Turner. *The handbook of project based management*. London: McGraw Hill; 1999.
- Project Management Institute. www.pmi.org
- Association for Project Management www.apm.org.uk

Action: practice points

Reading is only one way to undertake CPD and the Society will expect to see various approaches in a pharmacist’s CPD portfolio.

1. Think back to a project you observed or took part in. Make a list of what worked well and what might have been improved.
2. Imagine you are the project manager to produce a supersonic successor to Concorde or a new pharmacy service. List the risks you can think of, categorise them and then decide whether to mitigate, transfer or accept them.
3. List people you know who would make good sponsors or project managers. What qualities did you look for?

Evaluate

For your work to be presented as CPD, you need to evaluate your reading and any other activities. Answer the following three questions: What have you learnt? How has it added value to your practice? (Have you applied this learning or had any feedback?) What will you do now and how will this be achieved?