

The Devil's Dictionary of Project Management Terms¹

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Originally published in 1906, *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce offered cynical definitions of terms of the "political" language of the period. This posting attempts to provide similar "helpful" definitions of project management-related terms.

Activity schedule	A well-determined project timetable during which nothing you expected will probably occur
Agile development approach	A palliative to keep the stakeholders patient during an extended trial-and-error exercise in the same way that tapas can be served as a way of making customers feel that a collection of snacks is equivalent to a real meal.
Agile Project Management	A set of software product development principles based on good fellowship and poor governance.
Benchmarking	A means of comparison with other companies, designed either to comfort your company in its mediocrity or to lord it over your colleagues for theirs
Body of knowledge	The basis on which many standards are based. The challenge is to know when a body part is from a valuable discovery, from a sacred cow, or from a plague-pit.
Checklist	A method of reviewing using ticks. A tick is a bloodsucking mite that can act as vector of disease. This is why you should be very careful to check on the originator of the list (whence its name, of course).
Chicken or egg situation	At least in projects, this is a false dichotomy linked to gender confusion: most projects start as a monster cock-up, and at the end everyone gets egg on their face.
Consensus	The process of gaining agreement by lowering everyone's expectations until they match the average level of knowledge of the participants. Since this process discourages the participation of experts and encourages the masses, the average tends to reduce over time, with a predictable feedback effect. This is a favourite approach for politicians to ensure re-election but should be avoided in situations where the result is important such as medicine, wine-making and cookery.
Continuous improvement	Policy of perpetually moving the goalposts in order to explain why the situation never seems to change.
Cost Performance Index	A number inversely proportional to the size of begging bowl required by the project manager. See also "Schedule Performance Index"

¹ An earlier version of this dictionary was published on ESI's PMO blog several years ago; the dictionary is published here with author's permission

Critical chain project management	A technique based on sound scheduling principles but which insists on incorporating the Theory of Constraints (q.v.) in order to differentiate itself from other techniques.
Critical Path	The place on which to focus management attention while the project team sorts out the real problems.
Customer support	Rather like a surgical support, in that it more or less allows you to carry on but without addressing the underlying problem.
Earned Value	An objective set of numbers that measures any divergence from plan. Disliked by senior management because not subject to political pressure.
Empowerment	Giving staff enough authority to get into trouble by themselves but not enough to get out of it.
Estimating	There are 3 approaches to developing any estimate: 1) <i>The stakeholder approach</i> : provide the number most likely to be acceptable to key stakeholders in order to get your proposal accepted 2) <i>The consensus approach</i> : ask three people; add up their estimates. Provide this number (note the "traditional" averaging approach of dividing by three has been omitted!). 3) <i>The pseudo-scientific approach</i> . Ask an expert for an initial estimate. Multiply it by pi.
Forecast end-date	Similar to a mirage or the horizon: this is always kept in sight, but retreats as you approach it.
Forecasting	A project activity similar to the ancient science of augury in which the future is predicted by extracting the entrails of animals and examining them. For projects, the forecast is based on analysing the unappetising remains of recent activities or the (no more appetising) intestines of senior management (as in "I have a gut feeling about this ...").
Free Float	The time it takes the team on a successor activity to realise that the people they are depending on will not have finished on time.
Help-line	Phone-based alternative to good products or good service
Integration	As applied in mergers and acquisitions, it can represent any of the following "-ations": a) <i>optimization</i> : the best of both firms is preserved. Note: this is always the <i>justification</i> and never the result. b) <i>homogenization</i> : the cream of both companies is diluted with the less palatable components of the organization c) <i>cannibalization</i> : the less equal company is devoured and excreted other -ations such as decimation, desecration etc. are left as an exercise to the reader
Issue	An excuse for failing to meet project objectives
Issue management	A buck-passing exercise

Lessons Learned	A set of "smart-after-the-event" statements that will be overlooked in similar situations in future. The act of transforming information hidden in the minds of project participants into records hidden somewhere in a database. A form of electronic coprolites.
Lexicon	A technical dictionary. A list of definitions that are comprehensible only to people who already understand the concepts.
Life cycle	An approach that provides the project steering committee with a justification for their existence. A sequence of steps (or "phases") that inexorably lead the project team towards the Promised Land – but can condemn them to wandering in the wilderness beforehand. A sequence of phases that leads from eggs to caterpillars, pupa and then the emergence of ... a moth, frequently, instead of a butterfly.
Maturity	Ability to accept the failings that come with age. (see also <i>project management maturity</i>).
Merger	A meeting of equals, in which one is always much more equal than the other. The goal is integration (q.v.)
Milestone	A point in a project where everyone can congratulate themselves while secretly redefining the forthcoming goals.
Milestone schedule	The shortest distance between project crises.
Motivation	A psychological technique used by management to get unpaid work from the employees
Offshoring	The downside of outsourcing (q.v.) with the added complication of conflicting time-zones
Outsourcing	Transferring key capabilities to people who have less interest in your long-term reputation than in their short-term profits
PERT Diagram	A graphical representation of the predicted course of a project. An acronym for Place Events Randomly Together. The original PERT diagram was an "activity on arrow" representation, which raises the question of who in the project is William Tell, who is his son, and the role of the apple.
Post Project Review	Sometimes called "project post mortem", it is more reminiscent of a forensic exhumation in which the putrid remains of the corpse provide little information as to its earlier existence and even less for how the living should behave.
Process Groups	Formal assemblages of processes based on characteristics that are of use to the assemblers rather than to the users of the concept. Its greatest benefit is as a basis for identifying people who do not understand project management as they think that the process groups constitute a project life cycle.
Program Management Office	A mechanism for encouraging senior managers to accept the responsibility for the way in which they undermine projects.
Program transition plan	What to do at the end of a project or program. Similar to the evacuation drill on a cruise ship. The major difference is that most cruise ships do have an adequate supply of lifeboats.

Project	A temporary disruption to the smooth running of the organization
Project Activity	This is defined as the smallest element of planning. As such it is the project equivalent of a quantum in physics – it is impossible to know all of its characteristics accurately (the uncertainty principle) and has no actual physical reality until it is measured.
Project Budget	Maximum amount that management can admit to expecting to spend on a project. Minimum amount that a project manager can justify to the team as an initial estimate of what the project will cost. A number adapted to achieve the required result from a business case calculation.
Project Charter	A document similar to the vows of marriage that is happily signed by all parties before the hard reality of life has been fully understood.
Project Closure	Last point at which to adapt the client's expectations in line with what is likely to be delivered. Project Closure is often a time of celebration – at least to celebrate that the ongoing cash outflow will probably start to be reduced.
Project Configuration Management	A means of ensuring that all random project changes and errors will seem to have been deliberate once the project is complete.
Project kick-off (or "launch")	Similar to spacecraft launch – an event at which top management sends their team into the unknown with no visible means of support.
Project Management	"To project" is to bulge or distend, to throw or to foretell; project management is the art of deciding which of these verbs applies in each case
Project Management Maturity	A) A concept that allows management to justify the organizational changes they wanted to make anyway, based on a set of concepts that they do not understand. B) A set of ideas developed by project managers in the hope that they will be able to impose their model of effectiveness on senior management in order to make their own jobs more bearable. C) A state between imbecilic infancy and demented senility. Some organizations pass from the initial state to the final one without even pausing on the way.
Project Plan	A management fiction. A basis for uncontrolled investment. A pious set of statements as to how the project should be run and will progress, based on the assumption that all improbable opportunities will necessarily occur and that no threats, however likely, could ever come to pass.
Project Portfolio Management	A means of keeping all of the project staff busy. Allocating all of the project eggs to a set of baskets that are then all carried by a single person.

Project sponsor	What used to be called "the patron", defined in Dr Samuel Johnson's dictionary as "one who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery"
Project sponsorship	Act of giving a minimum of money and support to an idea with which the sponsor wishes to be associated if it succeeds, but in which he does not really want to be involved in case it fails.
Risk management	A process disliked by management because it shines the cold light of day on their dreams and promises.
Risk management plan	A hopeful specification of how risks should be managed in the enterprise. It is rarely created and even less frequently consulted.
Rolling wave planning	The "so far so good" approach to travelling in that you know exactly where you are going but have no idea where you will end up. It is based on adding only a few straws at a time to a camel's back in the belief that it will not notice the increasing load. The belief that sunk costs will serve to justify ongoing investment. Similar to the Agile approach but without the hype.
Schedule Performance Index	The reciprocal of this ratio provides a measure of the importance of finding valid reasons for extending the schedule or reducing other stakeholder expectations.
Stakeholder register	Rogues' gallery.
Status report	A document in which the reporter provides management with information to encourage them to come to the decisions that the person reporting hopes for. The link between this information and reality is inversely proportional to the gap between the plan and the actual status.
Sunk costs	Amount of money or effort that can never be recovered and therefore should not be taken into account when reviewing the budget. Known as "investment" by the proponents of the project and "waste" by its opponents.
Theory of constraints	A problem-analysis technique for justifying doubtful solutions with pseudo-scientific theories.
Threat	An uncertain occurrence that can cause distress. There are of two varieties of threat: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- misfortune to your project;- good fortune to a colleague's.
Total Float	A duration normally less than the delay that the delivery team will allow themselves before starting a task.
User	A user is somebody who tells you what they really wanted the day you give them what they asked for.

About the Author



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After many years managing international IT projects within large corporations, **Crispin ("Kik") Piney**, B.Sc., PgMP is now a freelance project management consultant based in the South of France. At present, his main areas of focus are risk management, integrated Portfolio, Program and Project management, scope management and organizational maturity, as well as time and cost control. He has developed advanced training courses on these topics, which he delivers in English and in French to international audiences from various industries. In the consultancy area, he has developed and delivered a practical project management maturity analysis and action-planning consultancy package.

Kik has carried out work for PMI on the first Edition of the Organizational Project Management Maturity Model (*OPM3™*) as well as participating actively in fourth edition of the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* and was also vice-chairman of the Translation Verification Committee for the Third Edition. He was a significant contributor to the second edition of both PMI's Standard for Program Management as well as the Standard for Portfolio Management. In 2008, he was the first person in France to receive PMI's PgMP® credential; he was also the first recipient in France of the PfMP® credential. He is co-author of PMI's *Practice Standard for Risk Management*. He collaborates with David Hillson (the "Risk Doctor") by translating his monthly risk briefings into French. He has presented at a number of recent PMI conferences and published formal papers.

He will be delivering a course on benefits management at PMI's SeminarsWorld in Rome on 4-5 May 2017, so there is still time to register.

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