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The difference between projects and programmes

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Many of us would class ourselves as project managers, and some of us aspire to be programme managers. But is programme management just about managing bigger projects? PMTips spoke to J. LeRoy Ward, author of *Dictionary of Project Management Terms* and Executive Vice President at [ESI International](#), a global learning company.

What's the difference between a project and a program?

In my book, *Dictionary of Project Management Terms*, I define a project as a temporary undertaking to create a unique product or service. A project has a defined start and end point and specific objectives that, when attained, signify completion. A programme, on the other hand, is defined as a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing the projects individually. A programme may also include elements of on-going, operational work. So, a programme is comprised of multiple projects and is created to obtain broad organizational or technical objectives. There are many differences between a project and a programme including scope, benefits realization, time, and other variables. One notable difference is time; for example, a project by definition has a beginning and an end (or at least one hopes so!); certain programmes, while having a beginning may not have an end. A classic example of one of these types of programmes is an annual construction programme.

There seems to be more information around now on programme management. Is it really taking off?

I have found in my travels and experience that programme management, although firmly embedded in certain industry verticals such as defence, is a new idea and concept in the commercial area. During the past several years, I have had many conversations with our clients who are realizing that many of the work initiatives they have undertaken, either for themselves or for their clients, are really programmes, not projects, and they are looking for the best way to manage them. The U.K. government (Office of Government Commerce) recognized this a while ago when it published *Managing Successful Programmes*. One can consider it a guide for programme management. Since it was published in 2003, I have seen an increasing number of books and articles on the topic, but it pales in comparison to the wealth of literature available for project management. The Project Management Institute has also recognized the value of programme management and recently introduced the Program Management Professional (PgMP®) credential. It appears that programme management, although a concept that has been around for many, many years, is now seeing a greater level of interest in the global community.

How would you define the difference in skill sets between a project and a programme manager?

The skill sets definitely overlap and it's a bit artificial to try to separate the two. Nonetheless, there are differences which I tend to see along a continuum. In my experience as both a project and programme manager, the latter requires more refined skills in business areas such as negotiation, organizational change management, financial management, consensus building, and political savvy. Additionally, a programme manager needs to always keep his or her eye on the achieving the intended benefits of the program which can be different and apart from the objectives of any individual project.

What differs for a programme manager is the degree of expertise, application, and focus. Because a programme manager is really more of a business manager, programme managers do not necessarily have strong project management backgrounds. They hail from a variety of disciplines. To be sure, one finds many MBA's as programme managers as well as those having backgrounds in various technical and scientific fields.

Can a project manager ever be a good programme manager?

Yes, of course, but one may never assume that simply because an individual is a competent project manager that he or she will be successful in programme management as well.

One problem that programme managers come up against is the terminology. If you are working on a programme but your stakeholders still insist on using the word 'project', what can you do to ensure the message gets across that it is bigger than just one piece of work?

One needs to "drip feed" the notion that what they are working on is really a programme of interconnected projects rather than a project itself. One way to do this is to make sure that, as a programme manager, one is meeting with all project managers on a regular basis as a group. As each project manager is providing status and discussing his or her contribution to the greater whole, it will become evident that the work to be done is much broader and more comprehensive than a single project. That said, there are many companies that have their own vernacular which may be very difficult to change so one should not buck the "system" too much as it simply isn't worth the political capital. Focusing on the work to be done, more than the way it is described, will mean success for the programme manager.

That's great advice, thanks! Do you have another top tip for effective programme management?

Always keep in mind the stated benefits for launching the programme in the first place. For example, we are now implementing a content management system in the company. The reason we are doing this, broadly speaking, is to enable ESI to develop courses faster, better, and with less cost. The CMS program consists of multiple projects, from organizing our vast library of materials, to technical implementation, training, and other things. As a programme manager, our VP for Product Development, while needing to ensure that each project is completed, needs to ensure that the sum total of all the projects will meet our overall business goal of facilitating our product development process. In many programmes, there is a position called "benefits realization manager" simply to ensure that the business benefits are always front and center.

Thanks!

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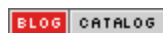
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