

Understanding Project Phases and Organization

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the phases of a project.
2. Describe the types of activities in each phase of a project.

Introduction

Projects, by definition, have a beginning and an end. They also have defined phases between the project kickoff and project closeout. A phase represents a grouping of similar activities that has a very loosely defined beginning and end. Phases are typically sequential, where the prior phase is essentially complete before the beginning of the next phase; however, phases do not have clear-cut end dates and some activities in an early phase of the project will continue into the later phases. This is in contrast to project beginning and ending dates and milestone dates, which do have clearly defined dates with the expectation that these dates will be met.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) identifies four major phases of a project as characteristics of the project life cycle.¹ These four life-cycle phases are initiation, planning, execution, and project closeout. The knowledge, skills, and experience needed on the project can vary in each phase. During the early phases of a project, the project leadership needs good conceptual skills, the ability to build a team, and the experience to build a project roadmap. During project closeout, the project leadership provides a high degree of motivation and attention to details. On a large project, lasting two or more years, it is common to see the project management team change leadership to provide skills that are appropriate to the final phases of the project.

Initiation

The **initiation phase**, which PMI labels “starting the project,” includes all the activities necessary to begin planning the project. The initiation phase typically begins with the assignment of the project manager and ends when the project team has sufficient information to begin developing a detailed schedule and budget. Activities during the initiation phase include project kickoff meetings, identifying the project team, developing the resources needed to develop the project plan, and identifying and acquiring the project management infrastructure (space, computers). On projects where the scope of work for the project is not well defined, the project team will invest time and resources in developing a clearer scope of work. On projects where the major project stakeholders are not aligned, the project team will expend resources and time creating stakeholder alignment.

Unlike project milestones, some activities associated with project initiation may be delayed without delaying the end of the project. For example, it is advantageous for the project to have the major project stakeholders aligned from the beginning, but sometimes it is difficult to get the commitment from stakeholders to invest the time and resources to

engage in an [alignment process](#). Sometimes it is only after stakeholders begin observing progress on a project that the project manager can facilitate the stakeholder alignment processes.



Image by iChris

Planning

The **planning phase**, which PMI labels “organizing and preparing,” includes the development of more detailed schedules and a budget. The planning also includes developing detailed staffing, procurement, and project controls plans. The emphasis of the planning phase is to develop an understanding of how the project will be executed and a plan for acquiring the resources needed to execute it. Although much of the planning activity takes place during the planning phase, the project plan will continue to be adjusted to respond to new challenges and opportunities. Planning activities occur during the entire life of the project.

Execution

The **execution phase**, labeled by PMI as “carrying out the work,” includes the major activities needed to accomplish the work of the project. On a construction project, this would include the design and construction activities. On an information technology (IT) project, this would include the development of the software code. On a training project, this would include the development and delivery of the training.

Closeout

The **closeout phase**—or using PMI’s nomenclature, “closing of the project”—represents the final stage of a project. Project staff is transferred off the project, project documents are archived, and the final few items or punch list is completed. The project client takes control of the product of the project, and the project office is closed down.

The amount of resources and the skills needed to implement each phase of the project depends on the project profile. Typically, a project with a higher-complexity profile requires more skills and resources during the initiation phase. Projects with a profile that indicates problems with alignment among key stakeholders or political and legal issues will require specialized resources to develop plans that address these issues early in the project. A project with a lower complexity level will invest more resources in the execution phase to complete the project as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Project Phases on a Large Multinational Project

A United States instructional design company won a contract to design and build the first distance-learning-based college campus in northern Argentina. There was no existing infrastructure for either the educational or large internet-based projects in this part of South America. During the initiation phase of the project, the project manager focused on defining and finding a project leadership team with the knowledge, skills, and experience to manage a large complex project in a remote area of the globe. The project team set up three offices. One was in Chile, where large distance education project infrastructure existed. The other two were in Argentina. One was in Buenos Aires to establish relationships and Argentinean expertise, and the second was in Catamarca—the largest town close to the campus site. With offices in place, the project start-up team began developing procedures for getting work done, acquiring the appropriate permits, and developing relationships with Chilean and Argentine partners.

During the planning phase, the project team developed an integrated project schedule that coordinated the activities of the design, procurement, and design teams. The project controls team also developed a detailed budget that enabled the project team to track project expenditures against the expected expenses. The project design team built on the conceptual design and developed detailed drawings for use by the procurement team. The procurement team used the drawings to begin ordering equipment and materials for the implementation team; to develop labor projections; to refine the construction schedule; and to set up the campus site. Although planning is a never-ending process on a project, the planning phase focused on developing sufficient details to allow various parts of the project team to coordinate their work and to allow the project management team to make priority decisions.

The execution phase represents the work done to meet the requirements of the scope of work and fulfill the charter. During the execution phase, the project team accomplished the work defined in the plan and made adjustments when the project factors changed. Equipment and materials were delivered to the work site, labor was hired and trained, a learning center site was built, and all the development activities, from the arrival of the first computer to the installation of the final light switch, were accomplished.

The closeout phase included turning over the newly constructed campus to the operations team of the client. A punch list of a few remaining items was developed and those items completed. The office in Catamarca was closed, the office in Buenos Aires archived all the project documents, and the Chilean office was already working on the next project. The accounting books were reconciled and closed, final reports written and distributed, and the project manager started on a new project.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The phases of a project are initiation, planning, execution, and closeout.
- The initiation phase, which PMI calls “starting the project,” includes activities such as holding alignment and kickoff meetings, identifying the project team, developing the resources needed to develop the project plan, and identifying and acquiring the project management infrastructure.
- The planning phase, which PMI calls “organizing and preparing,” includes developing detailed staffing, procurement, and project controls plans.
- The execution phase, which PMI calls “carrying out the work,” includes the major activities needed to accomplish the work of the project.
- The closeout phase, which PMI calls “closing of the project,” includes transferring staff, archiving documents, closing offices, completing punch list tasks, and turning over the results of the project to the client.

[1] Project Management Institute, Inc., A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide), 4th ed. (Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute, Inc., 2008), 11–16.

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