The Elusive Concept of a Project

One would expect that, after 60 years, the project management profession would have a pretty good definition a project, and how to determine if it was successful. Evidently we don’t.

The International Organisation for Standardization (ISO) has workgroups around the world busy compiling ISO 21500 which will be a global project management framework. And guess what aspects are giving its members sleepless nights: defining a project and how to measure its success.

Defining a project

The problem with “projects” is that they cover a wide range of endeavours from a student studying to pass an examination, to a huge team of professionals planning and executing a complex eight-year megaproject to stage the Olympic Games.

Both endeavours would be classified as projects if tested against the definitions of two eminent organisations, the Project Management Institute (PMI) “A project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result” or the Association for Project Management (APM) “A project is a unique, transient endeavour undertaken to achieve a desired outcome.”

Even making a cup of coffee would qualify as a project using the above definitions. Clearly this is an unsatisfactory situation. It has been suggested by a member of the ISO 21500 team that a better definition could be “A project is an endeavour, undertaken by a temporary team, to create a new or changed product, service or result.” This would exclude studying to pass an exam or making a cup of coffee, as they do not involve setting up a temporary team. In a business context this would be valid as it would be highly unusual to find a single resource project.

However, the suggested definition implies that a project cannot be undertaken by only one person, unless you can have a one-person team. Wikipedia defines a team as “... a group of people or animals linked in a common purpose. Teams are especially appropriate for conducting tasks that are high in complexity and have many interdependent subtasks. A group in itself does not necessarily constitute a team. Teams normally have members with complementary skills and generate synergy through a coordinated effort which allows each member to maximize his or her strengths and minimize his or her weaknesses”. In a business context this would be valid as it would be highly unusual to find a single resource project.

However, for PMP exam purposes the definition of a project still stands as “A project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result”.