Project Definition

The purpose of project definition is to make sure the project builds the right things. The purpose of planning is to make sure the project team builds them efficiently. The process of project definition is not usually part of the project; it is part of project initiation done by the organisation.

One of the leading causes of project failure is starting an ill-defined project with different people having different opinions about the project's scope, deliverable and the expected benefits as a result of completing the project. The key purpose of project definition is to:

1. Identify the benefits the organization expects out of the project[1]

2. Define the project's deliverables (based on requirements[2]) sufficiently for a qualified project manager to begin developing a project plan

3. Determine the organisational viability of the project based on the strategic alignment of the work[3] (ie, how effectively does the proposal fit with, and facilitate the achievement of, the organisation's strategy)

4. Determine any environmental considerations such as using 'green project management[4]' principles to reduce the impact of the project's work and/or deliverable

4. Identify and communicate risks, assumptions and issues currently known about the project to both executive management and the project management team for planning purposes

5. Facilitate the formal sanctioning of the project through a portfolio management function, and the assignment of the project manager.

All projects begin with some stimulus, an idea for a new product, the cost of some raw material suddenly increasing, or changes to the strategic plan. The stimulus initiates an analysis to determine whether the project is feasible (ie, can we do it?)[5]. If the project is feasible, the next phase of analysis creates a business case for the project (ie, should we do it)[6]. The proposal is then included in the next Portfolio Review[7] to determine if the idea has sufficient value to warrant using the organisation's scarce resources to implement as a project (or program). Assuming the project demonstrates sufficient value to be selected for implementation, the formal project initiation processes are started.

The business case is summarised in the form of a Project Charter[8]. The charter is an executive-level summary of the business case that contains, at a minimum, the essential items executive management needs to make a

---

[1] For more on **benefits** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1023_Benefits_and_Value.pdf

[2] For more on **requirements** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1071_Requirements.pdf

[3] For more on **strategic alignment** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1006_Strategic_Alignment.pdf

[4] For more on **'green project management'** see: https://www.greenprojectmanagement.org/

[5] For more on **feasibility** see WP1027: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1027_Feasibility_Studies.pdf

[6] For more on the **Business Case** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1018_Business_Case.pdf

[7] For more on **Portfolio Management** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1017_Portfolios.pdf

[8] See **Defining the Project Charter**: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1019_Charter.pdf

decision on who should manage the work. The Project Charter is in effect a contract between the project manager and executive management describing what the PM needs to do to be successful.

Depending on the project, other documents that define the project deliverables such as contracts, specifications, and statements of work (SOW)[9], may be developed before the project is chartered or may be developed as a part of an early phase of the project's work. Where these more detailed documents exist, they are referenced in the project charter.

If they are to be developed by the project team, this is defined in the project charter along with their approval processes. Projects that involve as significant design effort typically also have defined phases and gateways (go/no-go) where the project is re-assessed to ensure it is still contributing value.

_____

First published 2nd Jan. 2010 – augmented and updated.

Downloaded from Mosaic's PMKI Free Library.

For more papers focused on *Project Initiation* see:
https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-PBK-005.php

Or visit our PMKI home page at:
https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI.php

---

[9] For more on the **SOW** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1070_SoW.pdf