The Project Canvas: A Simple Frame To Increase Success in Your Projects

From the book, The Project Revolution (LID 2019) by Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez

Projects are timeless and universal. The construction of the pyramids in Egypt, the development of modern cities, the Marshall Plan, the Apollo space programme, the creation of the European Union – all these achievements were the result of ideas being turned into reality through projects. Project-based work is the engine that generates the major accomplishments of our civilization; it has stimulated society to advance and often go beyond long-established scientific and cultural limits.

After studying hundreds of successful and failed projects ranging from small individual ones, I have developed a simple tool – the Project Canvas – that can be applied by any individual, team, organization or country.

The framework, which covers the basic principles and fundamentals of projects that everyone should know, is practical and easy to implement. It is a proven tool that will assist you in leading projects more successfully and in making your dreams a reality.

It is composed of 14 dimensions grouped into four major domains:
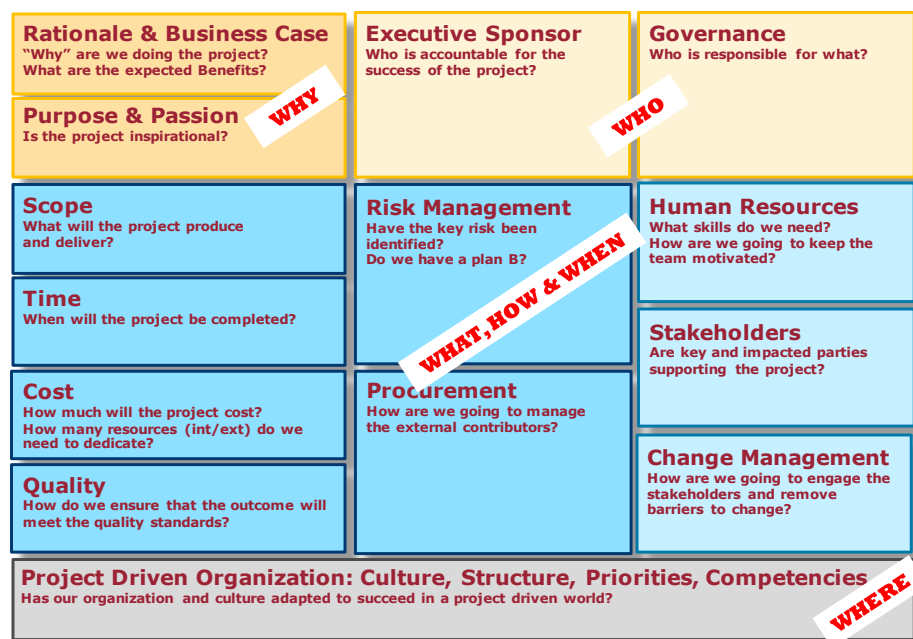
The framework can be used by leaders and organizations at the beginning of a project to assess how well it has been defined and whether it is worth starting right away or needs further refinement. It can be applied to programmes, strategic initiatives and any other activities that can be considered projects.

Domain 1: Why

The **Why** dimension covers the triggers and actual meaning of a project (the rationale and business case, and the purpose and passion), which will become the drivers once the project gets underway.

1. Rationale and Business Case

All project management methodologies demand that projects always have a well-defined business case. Experience shows, however, that business cases have biases and subjective assumptions, especially concerning the financial benefits from the project, which often get inflated in order to make the project seem more attractive to the decision makers. Have you ever seen a project with a negative or meagre return being presented?

2. Purpose and Passion

Two of the newer elements in the Project Canvas are purpose and passion. Besides having a rationale, a project should be linked to a higher purpose.

Domain 2: Who

The **Who** domain relates to the executive sponsor and governance, and it addresses the elements of accountability and allocation of responsibilities.
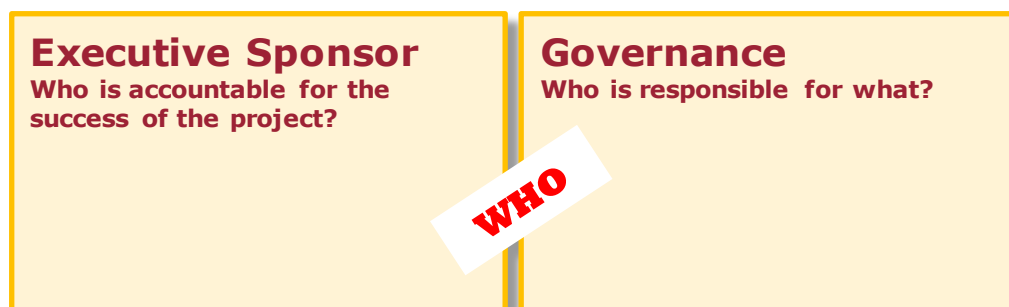
3. Executive Sponsor

Many projects start without it being decided who is ultimately accountable for their successful delivery. As projects tend to go across departments, business units and countries, they are often prone to 'shared accountability and collective sponsorship.' As a result, many executives feel responsible, yet no one is really accountable for driving the project to completion.

4. Governance

The executive sponsor, together with the project manager, should define the project governance. The governance in a project is represented by a project chart in which the various contributing roles and decision-making bodies are defined.

One of the most important bodies in a project is the steering committee, which is chaired by the executive sponsor and run by the project manager. The members and the frequency with which they meet often determine the importance the project has for the organization.

Domain 3: What, How & When

The **What, How & When** domain covers the fundamental elements that constitute the project. They can be split into technical areas and people-related elements.

Scope
What will the project produce and deliver?

Time
When will the project be completed?

Cost
How much will the project cost?
How many resources (int/ext) do we need to dedicate?

Quality
How do we ensure that the outcome will meet the quality standards?

Risk Management
Have the key risk been identified?
Do we have a plan B?

Procurement
How are we going to manage the external contributors?

WHAT, HOW & WHEN

Human Resources
What skills do we need?
How are we going to keep the team motivated?

Stakeholders
Are key and impacted parties supporting the project?

Change Management
How are we going to engage the stakeholders and remove barriers to change?

5. Scope

Understanding and agreeing what the project will consist of and deliver – the scope – is one of the *raisons d'être* of project management. Other terms for scope include specifications, detailed requirements, design and functionality. The scope is the most important element in making an accurate estimation of the cost, duration, plan and benefits of the project. Various tools can be used to try to determine what the outcome of the project will look like, yet this remains one of the most difficult tasks.

6. Time

"Time is money": this famous phrase, attributed to Benjamin Franklin, is an absolute in projects. Time is one of the major characteristics of projects in that, unless there is an articulated, compelling, official and publicly announced deadline, there is a good chance that the project will be delivered later than originally planned. Delays in projects mean, besides extra costs, a loss of benefits and expected revenues, both having a tremendous negative

impact in the business case of the initiative. A project without a deadline should not be considered a project – better call it an experiment, an exploration or daily business activities.

7. Cost

Budget in projects is composed mostly of the time dedicated by the project resources. These mainly include the people working on the project plus all other investments (consultants, material, software, hardware, etc.) required to develop the scope of the project. Budget is, together with time and scope, the third main constraint in traditional project management. Without budget, there is no project.

8. Quality

Ensuring that the outcome of the project meets the quality expectations is an integral part of project management, yet it is often overlooked or not a priority. Often teams focus on doing the work and leave the quality part to the end of the project, when adjustments are most expensive.

9. Risk Management

Risk management is one of the most important techniques in project management and an essential duty of the project manager. Bluntly, if a project fails, it is because the risks that caused the failure were either not identified or not mitigated on time by the project team.

10. Procurement

Projects tend to have a novelty component; therefore, the need to hire external capabilities to deliver the project is much higher. As projects are temporary assignments, it is cheaper to engage external capacity during the project than to hire internal resources.

11. Human Resources

Today, project managers need to be project leaders too, especially for the more complex and cross-functional projects. These require pulling resources across the organization and changing the old status quo. In fact, we can argue that the best project managers are leaders but also entrepreneurs – they are the CEOs of their projects.

12. Stakeholders

Stakeholders are individuals and groups (entities, organizations, etc.) that are impacted by, are involved in or have an interest in the outcome of a project. The larger the project, the more stakeholders there will likely be. The more stakeholders, the more efforts required in terms of communication and change management activities.

13. Change Management

Aim to communicate what needs to be done clearly and accurately, ensuring that the organization and its employees are ready to embrace the changes introduced by a project. According to PMI's Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, about 75-90 percent of a project manager's time is spent formally or informally communicating during the implementation phase of a project[1].

Domain 4: Where

The **Where** domain covers the external elements that can have a positive or negative impact on the project.

Project Driven Organization: Culture, Structure, Priorities, Competencies
Has our organization and culture adapted to succeed in a project driven world?

WHERE

14. Project-Driven Organization

Most Western companies have a hierarchical, functional structure, which is ideal for running their daily business activities. Budgets, resources, key performance indicators and decision power are 'owned' by the heads of business units, departments and functions.

However, the largest and most critical projects – the strategic ones – are cross-functional and cross-hierarchical by nature: they cut across the organization. The most successful organizations today have adjusted their structure to facilitate and support the execution of projects. They have become project driven.

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[1] PMBOK® Guide – Sixth Edition (2017), https://www.pmi.org/pmbok-guide-standards/foundational/pmbok