What is a project?

Basic definition

A project, simply put, is a piece of work to produce a specific, one-off product of some kind that is not part of routine work. Assembling a car on a production line is not a project because although the output (a car) is a product and it is specific, it is not one-off. However building a kit car in your garage is a project because it fulfils all three criteria. Using a university example, the annual cycle of recruitment and enrolment is a lot of essential, hard work, but it isn’t a project because it is not one-off. However building the new Business School was a project as we’ll only ever build one such building.

Formal Project Management definition

The PRINCE2 manual describes projects thus: “A management environment that is created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to a specified Business Case”, and additionally “A temporary organisation that is needed to produce a unique and predefined outcome or result at a pre-specified time using predetermined resources”.

The above criteria and definitions introduce a fourth criterion: a project is also the management environment that is set in place to deliver the specific, one-off product.

Using the above three-point criteria one could argue that purchasing a specific one-off piece of furniture for the Board Room is a project. However this is such a small piece of work that it clearly would not make sense to treat it as such – putting a “management environment” in place would clearly be overkill, so it doesn’t meet the fourth criterion. A key concept here is the Business Case – you wouldn’t need a formal business case to buy some new furniture, but you do for a real project.

So to establish whether something is a project you also need to get an idea of scale and complexity. Something at the high extreme of this scale would be a large project costing many hundreds of thousands of pounds and lasting a year or more. At the other end of the scale are pieces of work that aren’t really projects because they are too small and simple.

Assessing project size and complexity

To answer the above issue, the MMU Project Management Templates & Toolkits web page provides a tool for assessing a proposed piece of work’s impact and complexity. Thus if it fits the first three criteria given above (i.e. specific, one-off, product) and the score obtained from the two tables in the above noted document is higher than 7 you should treat it as a project. If it scores 7 or less it is probably too small a piece of work to count as a project.

Problems

Things aren’t always clear-cut. The University may decide to treat something as a project even if it doesn’t fit the above criteria; and conversely may sometimes attempt to implement something that should be treated as a project without due regard to the “management environment”.

In the former case, so long as the sponsorship is both senior enough and well defined, there is no reason why a piece of work should not be treated as a project. For example if each year’s recruitment cycle is agreed, at senior level, to be subject to a project management approach, there is no need to oppose this out of pure pedantry.

On the other hand, where real projects are not being effectively managed, this should always be brought to the attention of a senior manager as there is a high risk that it will not succeed otherwise.

1 Even if we build a new Business School, it will be a different building with unique design, etc.
3 Of course you may still want to use a project management approach to help plan and manage the delivery of the work
How to agree a project?

The PIP Process document referred to above (see also note 2) describes the process for agreeing all IT related projects. There is no formal process in place for other types of project, in which case you should follow the protocols you may have in place locally (e.g. within Estates) or as directed by your management.

Version 1 July 2013, B Levitan
Version 2, October 2014, B Levitan (updated to reflect formation of PIP Advisory Group)